Articulating the Hip-Hop Nation: Rap as Transnational Urban Subculture in the United States and France

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Adrian Fielder

Articulating the Hip-Hop Nation:
Rap as Transnational Urban Subculture in the United States and France

My hip-hop will rock and shock the nation / like the Emancipation Proclamation.

One perspective on the cultural space(s) which this essay will attempt to investigate is provided by a scene from a recent movie: a young adult male in a fifth-story apartment can be seen placing a pair of large audio speakers in his open window, facing outwards. Clad in a T-shirt with the emblem for L.A.-based rap group Cypress Hill, the man is standing in front of a turntable system and preparing to spin vinyl records: he is a DJ.

A "disk-jockey," of course, is someone who plays records consecutively on the radio, or at parties and dance clubs. But this guy is a hip-hop DJ, which means that his art involves much more than simply putting on one record after another; a hip-hop DJ usually has several disks spinning simultaneously on the turntables, which must be

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mixed together during performance. The records include various "samples"—rhythmic and melodic riffs borrowed from other musical genres (such as soul or jazz) or from other hip-hop artists, but also sounds from sources as varied as public speeches, television programs and movies, video games, etc.—which provide the aural background over which the "rappers" deliver their lyrics (either "freestyle" improvisation, or recited lines written beforehand). Hip-hop music originally emerged from the boroughs of New York City during the 1970's and has evolved rapidly ever since: rapping has become (in some locales) an extremely complex verbal art form, and the DJs have continually transformed production techniques by incorporating the latest advances in digital sound technology.

But the film scene described above reveals what might seem at first like an incongruity. As soon as the DJ begins the music, the camera showing us his performance takes flight through the window and hovers in mid-air, offering a panoramic vista of an inhospitable urban landscape: not Brooklyn or Philadelphia or even Los Angeles, but rather a low-income housing project outside Paris. The rapping is done in an angry, staccato French, and the samples played by the DJ include neither James Brown nor Thelonius Monk, but rather Edith Piaf and the Beastie Boys. The scene is from Mathieu Kassovitz's 1995 film La haine (Hate), a '95 Cannes award-winner (for Best Director) which dramatizes the hostile realities faced by children of families immigrated to France from former colonies in Africa and the Caribbean. The youths' speech is interspersed with English expressions current in rap music, they wear clothing and hairstyles popular in US urban culture, and they even pay earnest homage to the "break-dancing" moves developed by the first American hip-hoppers in New York.

If all of this seems a bit strange from an outsider's perspective, for those familiar with the hip-hop (sub)culture, the international scope of rap music is already old news. As Paul Gilroy points out, hip-hop has been a transnational phenomenon from its inception, when the ingenious sound systems first brought to the South Bronx in the 1970's by reggae dub-masters immigrated from Jamaica were quickly adopted by local artists to create tracks by interweaving sound bites from previously-recorded songs (33-34). Since that time, the influence of hip-hop has spread around the globe with head-spinning speed; rap music is now both consumed and produced by youths in Tokyo, Sydney, Rio de Janeiro, Kingston, Madrid, London, Paris, and Berlin, to name just a few cities.

In many cases, hip-hop artists in these locales have "mimetically" reflected attitudes and concerns more apposite in Compton or Queens than in their respective national spaces, by faithfully reproducing metaphors, ideas, and expressions (often in English) originally developed in the lyrics of US artists. At the same time, however, the genre has often been adapted by artists into an expressive response to highly localized social and political realities. In this way it has become a stridently polemical voice by which urban subcultures in different countries have articulated outspoken critiques of particular nationalist agendas. The present essay will attempt to address the most salient issues at stake in the global popularity of this musical form by analyzing the specific ways in which it has been employed and, at times, transformed by French hip-hop artists (the vast majority of whom are descendants of immigrants from former French colonies in Africa and the Caribbean).

Simon Frith, who has done extensive work with the roles that music plays in the socialization of young adults in British towns, has argued that "for young people, at least, music probably has the most important role in the mapping of social networks, determining how and where they meet and court and party" (177). Concentrating on the extreme popularity of so-called "ethnic music" among marginalized youths in England, Frith comes to the following conclusions: ...by choosing from, operating with (and perhaps subverting) musical practices that carry wider cultural messages...young people...situate themselves historically, culturally, and politically in a much more complex system of symbolic meaning than is available locally. (176-77)

From this perspective, musical genres such as reggae, hip-hop, punk, funk, etc.—which have developed in response to the hegemonies operative in specific political and cultural contexts—can be appropriated by groups in different (yet similar) social circumstances as a viable means of articulating cultural difference from the mainstream norm.

Frith's propositions would seem to confirm the contention that, in our postcolonial/postmodern world, "the global circulation of images and sounds, goods and people...detransform the process of imagining communities" (Shohat and Stam 7). In this sense, the appropriative gesture which has established hip-hop in France might be read as an affirmation of the possibilities for immigrant communities living there to "map the networks of an alternative (and even oppositional) space of identification, a "subnation" founded precisely on the transnational affiliations mobilized through rap music. However, in the light of work currently being done in a number of different disciplines, we should be aware of another quite valid interpretation of the global scope of this cultural form.

Arjun Appadurai, for instance, argues that, as national boundaries are becoming more fluid and new "spaces" (or "globalscapes") are created by global structures of power, the frontiers demarcating cultural fields are being radically reconfigured according to a late capitalist model. From this perspective, it might very well be argued that mem-
members of French immigrant communities would not have been able to appropriate hip-hop in the first place were it not for their access to a sort of ready-made "global counter-culture"—a corpus of cultural material commodified and disseminated by multinational corporations which have identified disenfranchised urban subcultures around the world as a profitable "target audience" for hip-hop consumption. Such a reading would suggest that it is the contemporary shift away from the nation-state toward the transnational trade alliance as the privileged "locus" of institutional hegemony—and not the creation of "empowering" cross-cultural linkages among marginalized subjects—which has enabled the formulation of social/artistic (counter)discourses aimed at destabilizing unitary myths of nationhood.

In this essay I will propose a reading which attempts a synthesis of these positions. For, it would be both difficult and pointless to disagree with Appadurai's claim that, the consumer has been transformed through commodity flows...into a sign, both in Baudrillard's sense of a simulacrum that only asymptotically approaches the form of a real social agent, and in the sense of a mask for the real seat of agency, which is not the consumer but the producer. (42)

Yet it would be erroneous to assume that French hip-hop is a purely "consumptive" art form, the result of a mindless assimilation of its American version. Indeed, as I will attempt to demonstrate, the hip-hop genre (as practiced in both countries) provides a number of insights into the multiform modes of tactical reappropriation by which passively passive consumers of cultural products are able to "poach" (in de Certeau's sense of the term) on those very products, inscribing their own authorship on the objects through which a productivist economy necessarily articulates itself.

In order to do this, I will first need to historicize hip-hop's development as an art form and a subculture in the United States in relation to Jacques Attali's influential work on the political economy of music (Noise). Then I will analyze the ways in which key themes and trends in US hip-hop have been reflected and transformed by French artists. I hope in the process to demonstrate that hip-hop music can be understood as a "deteritorialized" locus of identification which—even as it has been colonized by transnational corporate capital—has enabled groups from marginalized communities in France to establish a performative/discursive space from which to contest the dominant narrative(s) of French nationalism.

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Articulating the Hip-Hop Nation

Bringin Da Noise: Rap and Ritual Murder in America

I'm on a mission, scrambling my enemies' transmission...—Jeru the Damaja, NYC-based rapper, "Statik" (1996)

In Signifying Rappers, David Foster Wallace comments on a marked paranoia he encountered time and time again when reading through 513 articles written about rap music in 1989. Of all the articles, fewer than a dozen attempted in any way to describe the genre in musical terms; the rest were devoted to delineating "the connection between rap and gangs, rap and race, rap and crack, rap and 'lost generations' we'd never 'found' to begin with" (Costello and Wallace 39-40). He attributes this to hip-hop culture's adamant rejection of the values and tastes of mainstream white America, the founding gesture by which rap proclaims itself as "the weird anthemic march of one Other'd nation, marginalized and yet trapped in our own metropolitan center, a nation that cannot secede and may not assimilate and is thus driven still deeper inside" (40).

Wallace's formulation is not his own invention; indeed, from the very inception of the genre, numerous rap artists have labelled their music as the authentic expression of a "nation" defined in opposition to dominant American culture. In the late 1970's, pioneer rapper Afrika Bambaataa became an international spokesman for the "Zulu Nation," a group of hip-hoppers from the Bronx who wished to eliminate gang violence by uniting under the collective groove of a musical form based on a shared African heritage (Louis and Prinaz 3). Artists such as The 45 Kings, Queen Latifah, Brand Nubian, KMD, and Public Enemy (among many others) would continue this tradition into the 1980's, claiming affiliation with the Nation of Islam and/or with various African tribes, and incorporating imagery of ancient Egypt into their group personae.

Attali provides us with an extremely productive and well-informed framework with which to interpret both the polemical stance endorsed by self-proclaimed spokesmen of "the hip-hop nation," and the fear it seems to inspire in the hearts of many Americans. Examining the role played by "legitimized" music in the official rhetoric of numerous nation-states, from the royal courts of Medieval France to the totalitarian agendas of National Socialism, Attali finds that the political economy of state-sanctioned music has most often been a fundamentally strategic one. This rhetoric stresses that music must be a "bulwark against difference" (8), the representation of a common set of values and beliefs unifying the nation's subjects. As he argues, the "Other" posited by this strategic economy of music is that which provides the title of his book: Noise.
In order to understand this phenomenon, Attali points out that “noise” is a form of violence. It is an assault of *immaterial* sound waves which cause vibrations in *material* objects, an intangible that actually destabilizes the structured order of molecular systems. In its biological reality, noise kills: any sound with a frequency over 20,000 hertz or with an intensity over 80 decibels will destroy the capacity of the ear drum to send a message to the brain. In information theory, noise is defined as “a signal that interferes with the reception of a message by a receiver”—even if the intervening signal itself has a meaning for that receiver (27). In this sense, noise does violence to codes, as well, by inhibiting or even preventing the process of communication between two or more parties who have agreed upon a given system of significance (whether through the medium of radio or television waves, telegraphic transmissions, etc.).

As Attali argues, the disruptive potential of noise becomes a source of serious concern for those political systems (such as the nation-state) intimately invested in the formulation and maintenance of codes (whether behavioral, linguistic, military, etc.). This is where music fits in: as the organization and structuring of specific noises within the “field” of time, musical codes represent the power to *order* (and thus to channel) the violence of noise in accordance with specific ideological/political goals. Attali’s thesis, then, is clearly indebted to the work of René Girard, who posits that the spectacle of real or symbolic sacrifice channels the “general violence” of human societies (e.g., that of “neighbor against neighbor,” or revolutionary insurgency) and projects it onto a particular body, thus crystallizing into a unitary myth that comes to represent the social order. Attali suggests that the structuring of auditory violence in music is in many ways analogous to the ordering of social violence actualized through a ritual murder. From this perspective, the institutional legitimation of particular musical codes can be read as an attempt to maintain the dominant social order by *silencing* the (alternative) sacrificial structures heralded by the noises of “popular” music, thus denying them the capacity to become a locus of identification for marginal groups: “music localizes and specifies power, because it marks and regiment the rare noises that cultures, in their normalization of behavior, see fit to authorize” (19-20).

As Attali maintains, this regulatory manipulation of music was not possible until the immateriality of noise could be transformed into a valorized system of objects which in turn could be circulated and exchanged through established networks of distribution; that is, not until music became a *commodity*. Attali traces the beginning of this capitalization process back to the advent of the nation-state, when an elaborate notation system for composing music was first developed and imple-

mented in the West. This marked a profound shift in the way music would be experienced. The sound waves of music could now be abstracted from the locus of performance, represented in symbolic form, and submitted to elaborate networks of capital which assigned particular “use-values” to those written musical codes (as well as to the musicians/conductors needed to translate those symbols into sound). Music, which before the invention of cultural capital operated in strictly localized environments, could now be *exported* to social spaces in which it did not have the same saliency—as symbolic enactment of ritual murder—as it did in the environments where it was originally produced.

Taking his cue from Benjamin, however, Attali maintains that it was not until the advent of mass reproduction techniques that music would be completely stripped of its ritualistic function. The new technologies of the early twentieth century became the catalyst for another shift in musical production, from the model of representation to one of repetition. Although representation took music out of the streets and into the concert hall, it was nevertheless dependent on the interpretive abilities of an entire orchestra and its conductor, and it was still a collective event performed in front of a live audience. Repetition, on the other hand, completely technologizes the process of listening to music, such that it has the potential of becoming a uniquely individual experience. Even where it is a collective endeavor (e.g., in a dance club), the act of listening to prerecorded music—since it has been transformed by mechanisms of repetition—is reduced to “a simulacrum of its original, ritualistic function,” even more so than with representation (89).

For Attali, the transition to the repetitive model of musical (re)production—consolidated in 1925 with the appearance of the first practical methods of using vinyl records—heralds the uncontested hegemony of corporate power characteristic of late capitalism. As he argues, the ubiquitous scope of this transition is attested by the corporate monopolization of radio. First conceived as a technology to enable the live transmission of public ceremonies, speeches, and musical concerts (i.e., as a mediated form of representation), radio was soon colonized by the industrial apparatus. An elaborate promotion system was instituted in collaboration with the disk-jockeys of commercial radio stations, a distribution network which transformed radio into the perfect medium for the marketing of mass-produced music (96-101).

Although Attali’s conclusions are amply supported by evidence he discovered during his gargantuan research effort, his totalizing claims appear disconcerting to those scholars interested in investigating sites of resistance at which such culturally dominant trends are implicitly or overtly contested. Even if we can grant empirical or theoretical validity
to the contention that popular music formerly had a ritualistic function which has since been transformed into a simulacrum (along with its consumers) by the cultural logic of repetitive capitalism, there is no evidence which should lead us to conclude that marginalized social groups have not been involved at the same time in creating musical forms which attempt to subvert—whether politically, economically, or symbolically—this seemingly ubiquitous movement.

What I am suggesting, then, is that in the light of Attali’s work, rap music can be seen as an attempt to reclaim (or more precisely, perhaps, to retain) the ritualistic function of music by incorporating those very objects on which noise is commodified into the localized performative space where music can be collectively experienced by an appreciative audience. The DJ’s art first developed as entertainment for house and block parties in Brooklyn and the Bronx, with the rapper adding an improvised rhythmic complement designed to exalt the DJ’s skills. Since the early days of hip-hop, the delivery of rhymes has become an art unto itself, but the lyrics are not uttered in a void; they are recited in a deliberately musical way in conjunction with the DJ’s own performative gestures. Among these gestures, “mixing” is the process of creatively interweaving selected rhythms, melodies, and phrases from different records into a “sound collage” which (ideally) has an aural unity all its own. Like the trans- and juxta-positionings enacted in the art of bricolage, mixing creates a sonic environment by “poaching” on different textual sources and then assembling the selected elements in such a way that they no longer belong to the structures from which they came. But each individual track is seldom allowed to progress without the DJ’s technical incisions, called “cutting” (or “scratching”). By manually reversing the revolution of the record on the turntable, this manipulation deliberately interrupts the chosen song’s melodic/rhythmic order as it has become known to the majority of people (since that is how it was recorded on the vinyl). Like the concept of noise in information theory, it is a tactical intervention that disrupts the transmission of a previously-coded message.

The rappers bring more noise to the production, and of course, it is the lyrics which have been primarily responsible for earning hip-hop its reputation in the eyes of mainstream America. Songs like Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power” (Fear of a Black Planet, 1990), Ice-T’s “Cop Killer” (1989), and NWA’s “Fuck Tha Police” (1988) put rap irrevocably in the media spotlight as the single most dangerous cultural form in the United States. In the unreleased song “On Da Front Line” (1992), a lesser-known rapper named Payday describes his lyrics as a codified form of communication which will facilitate the organization of a revolutionary movement against white America:

Waitin for the day to get revenge for the days of the slave ships...
You like puttin guns together, to give white people stormy weath-a;
but they can’t hide under no umbrella...
so who gives a hell a fuck about the Man? the K.K. Klan?
So here we go again scari-n people to death...
because we use broken English, so you can’t understand—
NOW WHO’S THE MAN?
They gotta beat me: I got the plan organized.

These angry embittered diatribes are polemically aimed at the political structures and disciplinary institutions which these artists perceive as the latest chapter in a long history of marginalization and outright coercion which began with the advent of American slavery. Those institutions react in turn: fueled by the rap controversy, the rhetoric of Tipper Gore and the Christian Right succeeds in regularizing parental advisory warnings on album covers to keep explicit lyrics out of the hands and ears of children: in 1989 Boston police illegally confiscate NWA albums from record stores in the hopes of preventing urban riots (Costello and Wallace 41). These and many more attempts at censorship and control of hip-hop noise seem motivated by the fear (not unfounded) that the music actually has the capacity to incite revolutionary violence in urban black youth, that this angry voice from America’s housing projects, if allowed to articulate itself unabated, might just herald a new social order—precisely by staging a ritual sacrifice of the old.

However, while most rap music explicitly names mainstream America as its sacrificial victim, it is less clear where the genre positions itself in relation to the corporate structures that run the music industry. Although it is still firmly rooted in the club scenes of metropolitan centers, hip-hop is no longer a merely localized expressive form which reappropriates and restructures the noise contained in cultural commodities, for rap has itself become a commodity (and an enormously lucrative one at that). Up until very recently, most American rappers who scored major record deals unabashedly flaunted their personal success, drawing attention to the material gains accrued from their verbal skills yet failing to mention that their high-powered words quite literally no longer belonged to them. Indeed, the majority of hip-hop artists have seemed blissfully unaware that, even as they criticize white establishment culture, their own music has been co-opted by corporate capital. In this sense, despite its creative interventions in the process by which music is transformed into a repetitive commodity, rap might be considered the most recent victim of an ignominious legacy (well documented by now) which Attali calls “the colonization of black music by the American industrial apparatus” (103).

According to Attali, the first and only significant challenge to this colonization was levied by the “free jazz” movement, which he de-
scribes as “a profound attempt to win creative autonomy, to effect a
cultural-economic reappropriation of music by the people for whom it
has a meaning” (138). The movement was initiated in the late 1950’s
and 60’s with the founding of cooperative groups deeply involved in
black nationalist agendas of the time (e.g., the Jazz Composer’s Guild
[1959] and the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians
[1965]), organizations which proposed to draw freely from the musical
sources of a shared African heritage in order to promote an expressive
and collective response to the hegemony of white capital in the music
industry. The free jazz movement failed to challenge the established
music industry economically, and Attali attributes this to the organi-
izers’ inability to develop a wide enough distribution network with
which to produce a demand for its music (138).

Since the demise of the free jazz movement (and since Attali’s
book), hip-hop music has been appropriated by many African-American
artists as a forum for a new black nationalism which self-con-
sciously stands in opposition to the established structures of the music
industry. Ironically enough, it is through the medium of radio that the
hip-hop nation in America has been most successful at articulating
alternative networks of dissemination for rap music. By now, of course,
there are hordes of DJs who promote mainstream rap (i.e., artists al-
ready signed on major labels) on commercial radio stations through-
out the States. Although the commercialization of hip-hop on such stations
would seem in many ways to confirm Attali’s contention that radio
serves as an ancillary to the music industry (along with another cultural
phenomenon to have emerged since Attali’s book: MTV), it should be
emphasized that Attali’s analysis does not take into consideration the
to which public radio stations in the States have allocated air time
for musical forms deemed “culturally significant” by station managers.

Many hip-hop DJs who started out spinning records at clubs and
block parties have made inventive use of this “alternative space”
within the radio medium by actually performing on air, mixing their fa-
favorite rap tunes together with their own blend(s) of turntable funk. As-
piring and established artists alike give demo tapes and unreleased
singles (oftentimes recorded on vinyl so as to be “scratch-able”) to these
DJs so that their sounds might reach hip-hoppers wherever the DJ
plays. One DJ from New York, Mike Nice, travels up and down the
eastern seaboard playing weekly and bi-weekly spots for different pub-
lic radio stations (including many college stations, such as Duke
University’s WXDU). Like many DJs, he operates his show in tandem
with one or two friends; these people assist with the equipment (which
they bring with them) and answer the station phone to take requests
from hip-hoppers who call in to hear a certain song and to pay respect
to their own friends by sending “shout-outs” or “big-ups” to people in
their own networks. Mike Nice claims to deliver his listeners with an
“education” about the underground hip-hop scenes in several eastern
cities, and the title of his show (“The Underground”) even suggests an
implicit connection between his nomadic trade and that practiced in
subterranean networks first established in the eastern United States
during the era of slavery. Thus, in addition to providing a representa-
tional space in which affiliations among fans and partisans of hip-hop
culture may be affirmed, DJs such as Mike Nice serve to “spread the
word” about certain styles of hip-hop, creating a market demand for
the artists they “represent” by playing their records on the air.

Even if this tactical use of broadcast radio might be interpreted as
an attempted challenge to the “colonization” of rap music by repetitive
capital, it could well be argued that the attempt is doomed to failure,
since the artists promoted by the “underground” DJ—even if they suc-
cceed in producing a demand for their music—will be obliged to sign
with a major label in the industry in order to get their product to will-
ing consumers. The Internet, of course, might prove instrumental in
changing this situation, as it provides the possibility of completely by-
passing the networks of dissemination through which the music indus-
try operates. Significantly, some hip-hoppers have recently been using
new technologies such as the MP3 (an audio format allowing sound
files to be easily downloaded from a website) to promote their own art
and even to develop an audience for the artists they “represent” by playing their records on the air.

In a recent attempt to protest the exploitative structures that mediate relations between
musicians and their audience, his group posted a number of unreleased
songs from their most recent album “Bring the Noise 2000” on
their own web site, despite warnings from their record company Def Jam (a
subsidiary of Polygram). After 500 or so people had already down-
loaded the songs, Def Jam threatened suit and Public Enemy complied.
Despite the industry’s temporary victory, however, Chuck D remains
confident that the Internet promises to increase the autonomy of indi-
vidual artists and even to phase out record companies altogether:
“we’re smiling because we see the fear in their eyes. We know that this
is something they can’t stop in the future ... technology is leveling the
playing field.”

Such talk is a relatively recent phenomenon in the hip-hop world. Indeed, while overt critiques of the recording industry have always
been at least marginally present in hip-hop discourse, until a few years
ago, no rap artists had yet made a concerted effort to retain ownership of
their music. But in 1993, the Wu-Tang Clan, a collective of eleven artists from Staten Island, started their own production company (Wu-Tang Productions) and released their first album, “Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers).” As Wu-Tang rappers Method Man and Shallah Raekwon explain in an interview on the album, the members started out trying to make it in the business individually, but they decided to pool their talent and resources together on one project. The intention from the start was to create a market for their style of rap, so that each member could then go on and produce an individual album (each one sporting the copyrighted symbol of Wu-Tang Productions). Due in large part to promotional efforts organized in collaboration with “underground” DJs (including Mike Nice, as well as one of the original New York hip-hop DJs, Funkmaster Flex), their brand of hip-hop was an immediate success. Since then, “Enter the Wu-Tang” has sold more than 1.5 million copies, each member has released at least one individual album, and the clan has reunited (with newly-acquired members) to produce another album in 1997 (“Wu-Tang Forever”), which sold 612,000 copies in its first week (a feat topped only once in the history of the music industry; Margasak C1). In many ways, then, the Wu-Tang collective has accomplished in a very short period of time what the free jazz movement was not able to do: create a significant market niche for a particular style of music, and then supply the demand in large quantities with their own production company.

Although some members claim affiliation with the “5% Nation” (a religious movement whose partisans ascribe to some but not all of the teachings of Islam and refer to black people as “gods” and “earth”), the group’s persona is hinged on their appropriation of the proto-nationalist mythology elaborated in Shaolin Kung-Fu movies imported from China. In fact, they have renamed various locales around New York with mythical place names taken from these films (e.g., Staten Island has become “Shaolin,” the “homeland” attacked and oftentimes colonized by invading warriors). “Enter the Wu-Tang” begins with an antagonistic challenge to a sword fight sampled from one such movie; and throughout the album, the rappers extend this play on the Kung-Fu genre by proclaiming their lyrics to be informed by martial arts skills with which they intend to oppose the entire music industry. When the record promoter doing the interview included on the album asks them to identify their “style” of rap, the interview is abruptly interrupted by the sounds of a Shaolin warrior telling an adversary, “It’s a secret! Never teach the Wu-Tang.” After the warrior inflicts a brutal punishment on his enemy, the rappers themselves issue the following warning: “Best protect ya neck!”

The Wu-Tang have capitalized on their unprecedented achievement by advocating their own brand of black nationalism. On their most recent album, Prince Rakeem (the RZA) describes their international commercial success as a first step in the process of establishing global lines of communication: “Tell you the truth it’s just one nation under a groove / Gettin down for the funk of it / [...] / tried to tell ya / bout the group recruit we scooped up CREEM like Breyer’s / Then spread across the globe like telephone wires” (“Severe Punishment”). This tele-communications metaphor is extended by another group member, Inspectah Deck, who in a freestyle rap session aired on a public radio station in New York, qualifies their collective as, “intelligent minds, building electrical, power lines, / magnetic, a track metal made of steel, / disconnect the Internet, burn corporate seals: Islam’s the shield!”

But the Wu-Tang Clan, although they do maintain control of the production process and retain ownership of their music, nevertheless depend on those very corporate seals to get their music to the consumers who want it: in the corner of the back side of their albums, a small insignia appears, bearing the name “RCA Records.” Another prominent rapper in the industry, Jeru the Damaja, criticizes the Wu-Tang’s failure to acknowledge their dependence on networks of white capital to get their message through. In “Ya Playin Yaself,” after describing the Wu-Tang’s promotional euphoria as “so much yin-yang, it’s ridiculous,” he asks pointedly, “If you got so much cheese where are the black distributors? / And these record companies shake em down like mobsters.” Since a few of the clan members wrote some rhymes for a St. Ide’s Malt Liquor advertisement, it has even been insinuated that the Wu-Tang has “sold out,” capitalizing on their popularity and compromising the ill-defined tenets of the hip-hop nation (Reugsuters 24). In “Wu-Wear: The Garment Renaissance,” the RZA tells the story of a man who used to be obsessed with wearing the most fashionable clothing sold by companies like Benetton, Tommy Hilfinger, etc.; but after becoming “highly civilized,” the man began purchasing his clothing uniquely from black-owned corporations for which the RZA then provides a list—the last of which is called “Wu-Wear.”

While the Wu-Tang have all the signs of becoming yet another episode in the continuing saga of hip-hop’s co-optation by dominant culture, what their case makes clear is that, for many American rap artists, hip-hop production has become a privileged mode of articulating and expanding the networks of an alternative (black) nationalism. If this project is oftentimes deeply implicated (out of necessity) in the (white) corporate power structures that have traditionally monopolized the music industry in the States, it should not be assumed that the artists of the “hip-hop nation” in the United States have therefore unquestioningly accepted the hegemony of corporate capitalism. This point is highlighted by Chicago hip-hoppers F. the System in an unreleased single called “No Match”:
It's time you realize, we verbally uprise,
on topics atomic energize, free enterprise, supplies the demand,
that's why I work hard to make my wallet size, expand...
It's not all about the lack of cream,
but it's all about the original: the red, black, and green!
Raw rhymes on the radio waves,
air pollution caused by industry persuasion, at every station,
that's why we got our own communication, called the Shodran nation...
F. the System qualify the rap played on the radio as “air pollution” put
there by the music industry, against which they define their own form
of communication, understood as a nation unto itself. They point out
that it is because of free enterprise capitalism that there is a market for
hip-hop, and they consider this a lucrative opportunity to increase their
own income; but they maintain that their pursuit of “cream” is con-
comitant with the project of spreading their message. This “original”
message, as they insist, is the “red, black, and green” of pan-African
nationalism (endorsed first by Marcus Carvey), the symbol of black
unity made popular world-wide by the musical form (reggae) whose
techniques provided the very impetus for hip-hop in the States. In this
song about the state of the music industry in America, the transnational
roots/routes of rap come full circle, revealing the global trajectories of
this music, which F. the System describes as, “rhymes combined with
subliminal telepathy / to rearrange the plans for the twenty-first cen-
tury.”

French Hip-Hop: Local Noise through Global Networks?

Hip-hop music first arrived in France in 1982, when a group of
American rappers toured Europe and the group Chagrin d’Amour released
an album clearly influenced by rap techniques (Dufose 135). This same year, Afrika Bambaataa made a special visit to France to rec-
ruit new members of the Zulu Nation (Lionel and Prinz 8). During the
tour, the Zulu leader discovered that the urban subcultures of French
cities were, demographically speaking, much different than the Ameri-
can hip-hop underground with which he was familiar.

Unlike American ghettos, French banlieues (or “suburbs”) are
inhabited primarily by a smorgasbord of different ethnic communities
immigrated from all over the former French colonial empire (as well as from
other European nations), the greatest number of which include blacks from West Africa and the Caribbean, Arabs and Sephardic Jews
from North Africa, and Portuguese (Hargreaves 11-18). Moreover, these
populations (with the exception of European immigrants) did not begin arriving in France in significant numbers until the post-war Re-
construction effort encouraged the migration of cheap labor from those
locales (Silverman 39-53). Facing a national employment crisis of epic
proportions, the banlieues outside the major French industrial centers
have become a crucible of urban violence, prostitution, and narcotics
trafficking. With limited access to educational opportunities and ex-
tremely atrophied vocational training, the children of immigrant fami-
ilies have inherited this strange world—socialized through the French
language (and thus alienated from their parents, who most often speak
in their native tongue), stigmatized (and often brutalized) by the police,
and subjected to abject poverty levels which show no signs of abating.

When Bambaataa went to France, then, he encountered a subculture
which, although economically and politically disenfranchised in similar
ways as urban blacks in the States, is not spatially grouped along ethnic lines. Youths in the banlieues most certainly share certain oppressive
social circumstances, but their identification as a subculture (if that is
indeed what they could even be called) does not hinge on an awareness
of three hundred years of slavery, segregation, and marginalization. Moreover, the kinds of alternative social networks which enable the performance circuits of “underground” DJs in the
eastern United States are only beginning to be established (if at all)
among children from immigrant communities only recently arrived in
France. Thus, it should not seem surprising that in the context of the
French banlieues, Bambaataa’s brand of black nationalism did not have
the unifying appeal that it had in the Bronx. He was actually able to
start a branch of the Zulu Nation in France, and among its members a
few went on to make rap albums (under the group names Les Little and
Sens Unik). But the music itself had a much more lasting impact than
Bambaataa’s ideology, which has since been abandoned by most
French rappers (Lionel and Prinz 8).

Despite the short-lived career of the Zulu Nation in France, many
rap artists in France have insisted on defining themselves as citizens of
a “hip-hop nation.” Groups such as IAM, Lionel D, Original MC, and
Ministère AMER have extended the metaphor initiated in American hip-hop, urging fans to “join” the nation by listening to their music.
Marseille-based artists IAM provide what seems to be an especially
bland case of how the “nation” advocated by French rappers is formu-
lated by way of implicit or explicit references to American artists:
following the example of numerous performers discussed above (e.g.,
the Wu-Tang Clan, Brand Nubian, Queen Latifah), IAM has adopted
the identity of a “foreign” ethnic group (“IAM” stands for “Imperial
Asiatic Men”) and incorporated the imagery of ancient Egypt into their
group persona.

In the light of Appadurai’s claim that the consumer in today’s
globalscapes has been transformed into a simulacrum of social agency,
such gestures on the part of French rappers can be read as a passive
assimilation of concepts they obtained from music sold to them as com-

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modifies. This reading is confirmed by a large portion of the hip-hop produced in France, in which the most prominent themes of mainstream US rap are simply translated into French (although English hip-hop expressions are oftentimes repeated word for word). The most common example of this is a slavish fetishization of the profits accrued from record sales. This preoccupation is reproduced in an exaggerated fashion in numerous songs by Weedy/le T.I.N., who claim, "Je raps rien que pour l'oselle donc passe moi le micro" (I rap for nothing but the cream... so pass me the mic) (Goudailly 135). Another theme elaborated in both French and American rap is that of organized violence against the police. In an incident which recalls the regulatory measures taken in the United States in response to NWA's "Fuck Tha Police," Ministère AMER was summoned to court by the French state in 1992 for their song "Sacrifice de poulets" [Pig Sacrifice] on the grounds that it was designed to incite urban riots in the banlieues (Bouilhet 34).

While such trends in French hip-hop production certainly echo the most popular subjects of American rap, it could also be argued that—despite the numerous differences between French banlieues and US ghettos—youths in each locale are nevertheless responding to similar social circumstances (e.g., rampant poverty, police brutality, government-subsidized housing, etc.). In this light, although the numerous affinities between French and American rap might very well support the claim that many French rappers "mimetically" reflect concerns and political agendas that have little or no saliency in their own cultural space(s), such evidence does not imply that the act of adopting hip-hop in the context of French immigrant communities necessarily precludes the possibility of adapting the form in ways that speak to the social and political realities of those communities. Indeed, as I have argued extensively above, the development of hip-hop in the United States provides a case study for the ways in which commodified cultural forms may be reappropriated by urban subcultures and reintroduced into localized performative environments. Thus, I am suggesting that any interpretation of rap as a transnational phenomenon must take account of the extent to which individual artists have transformed the genre (if indeed they have) to create distinctly local noise, i.e., to articulate expressive responses to specific ideological/political factors circumventing the locus of production.

In a French context, we can note that even when the themes given central importance are clearly derivative of US hip-hop, these very themes have oftentimes been adapted to resonate with what the rappers perceive as life in the banlieues. For example, the Hollywood Western has always been a favorite motif of US artists, especially since Kool Moe Dee's "Wild Wild West" (1985), and Public Enemy's "When I Get to Arizona" (Apocalypse 21), in which Chuck D and his DJ Flavor Flav imagine themselves as actors in a Western drama in order to draw a parallel between the agonistic world of the mythic American West and the equally hostile environment of the ghetto (in which, of course, the rappers are the heroes). In "Wild Cowboys," New York artist Sadat X scripts himself into a creatively-altered Western scenario in which the saloons and corrals are inhabited by black-skinned protagonists, and white America is sacrificed:

I'm in this to win this on the great wide trail;
I'm ten times as bad as John Wayne, could ever be cause I'm down with the Indian...
I'm a man: keep playin, keep them keys bangin;
Single man get three graves—there's gonna be a hangin.
Now this right here ain't for the youth to see:
A grown man assed out swingin from a tree...

In his song "Le nouveau western," Paris-based rapper MC Solaar appropriates this theme, but in doing so he does not cast himself as part of the action. On the contrary, Solaar describes a character named Harry, a "lascar" [homeboy] from a banlieue who imagines himself as a cowboy in the Wild West:

Poursuivi par Smith & Wesson, parfois, il rencontre des indiens, mais la ruee vers l'or est son seul dessein....
Tandis que John Wayne est looké à la Lucky Luke, propre comme un archiduc, Uncle Sam me dupe ;
Hollywood nous berne: HOLLYWOOD BURN!

(Pursued by Smith & Wesson, sometimes, he meets some Indians, but the Gold Rush trail is all that's on his mind....
While John Wayne is styled after Lucky Luke, clean like an archduke, Uncle Sam dupes me;
Hollywood hoaxes us: HOLLYWOOD BURN!)

By employing the third-person to evoke the Western ambiance, Solaar can draw attention to the ways in which the attitudes, behavior, and appearance of others in the banlieues are influenced by imported American culture. However, instead of commenting on this phenomenon from the "outside," Solaar situates himself as a member of the communities affected by this form of cultural imperialism. The third-person changes to first-person singular (with "Uncle Sam dupes me") and then to first-person plural ("Hollywood hoaxes us") as Solaar makes his message explicit: "we" are duped by Hollywood cinema. In a bilingual play on words between the French "berne" [hoaxes] and the English "burn," Solaar then directly quotes Public Enemy's "Burn Hollywood
pronounced “bee-otch”), derived from West coast "gangsta rap," has resurfaced in numerous songs by the groups Assassin and Suprême NTM, and has become so common in the banlieues that it even appears in some dictionaries of French slang (Goudaillier 51).

However, it should be emphasized that French rappers have at their disposal a number of tactical linguistic manipulations by which their speech can be made incomprehensible to mainstream French society. First of all, youths of the immigrant communities in France are able to select from a wide variety of linguistic sources. In fact, the slang spoken in banlieues today is comprised of expressions from Arabic, Creole, English, Bambara, and various French colloquialisms. Thus, when Idéal says, “tu vends ton âme au shàtan et puis opte pour la tune” [you sell your soul to the devil] and then opt for the tune] (Goudaillier 160), his message is clearly understood only by those French speakers who are familiar either with Arabic or with street slang as it is spoken in French cities. Moreover, many inhabitants of the banlieues employ a codified form of slang called verlan, which operates by inverting the phonetic or syllabic order of words from mainstream French.

The attempt at articulating a hip-hop nation in France becomes most complicated, perhaps, in the question of language. Most rap artists in the States, of course, compose their lyrics in a dialect which linguists call Black Vernacular English (BVE), a distinctly black discursive practice which shares morphological and lexical affinities with the most prominent West African tribal languages (Ibo, Wolof, Malinke, etc.). As recent conceptualizations in socio-linguistics have proposed, since its inception on the slave plantations, BVE has developed not only in relation to—but in opposition to—the linguistic norms of standard English. Evidently, banlieue youths are not socialized through such a historically well-defined linguistic tradition, in/from which they might articulate their own discourse(s) of cultural difference. Not surprisingly, many French rappers freely employ English expressions common in US hip-hop. For example, the pejorative "bitch" (pronounced "bee-otch"),
The use of the past perfect in the title explicitly announces that the dream which is the song's subject has been dissipated in the present. In the lyrics, this dream state is contrasted to the lived experience of surviving as a youth in the banlieues. At first, the dream is defined as a return to an unidentified struggle from which financial benefits will apparently result. But as in the song by Chicago artists F. the System, there is more expressed here: the wish for an entire landscape where skin color is not the primary marker of social identity, an "autonomous zone" if you will, separate from yet completely encapsulated by the surrounding (national) space. Here, as in one of Deleuze and Guattari's formulations of "autonomous zone," this "space" is completely deterritorialized, a dream-space Da System would like to share with their "brothers." Insofar as the dream is described in the past, we might interpret this song as a commentary similar to that made by MC Solaar: that the "homeboys" of the banlieues have no fantasy world of their own, that their dreamscapes—just as their cityscapes—have been constructed by dominant culture.

However, we also have an indication here of a possible solution to this dilemma. At the end of the passage, the "perfect cosmos" constituted by the dissipated dream is equated with "other phrases." Yet the inversions of mainstream words and the extended use of slang terms derived from other languages imply that the desire for other phrases, as soon as it is expressed in this way, is already fulfilled (at least partially). Although the members of Da System overtly bemoan the absence of an established oppositional discursive space (such as BVE provides American rappers), their lyrics actually perform the work of developing linguistic alternatives to standard language. Thus, this elaboration on a theme developed in French rap, which is itself an adaptation of American hip-hop to the specificities of a French banlieue context, is enabled precisely by localized discursive practices.

Unlike F. the System, who give a name to their "nation" and situate it within a specific cultural context, Da System leaves the notion of political resistance in French immigrant communities as an ambiguous if not imaginary possibility. Yet for many observers, whether they be supporters or not, rap music carries one of the most politically-charged messages within the already volatile cultural landscape of contemporary France. Considering the speed at which hip-hop vernacular has spread throughout France, it is not surprising that it has earned a large proportion of air-time in the mainstream media during the last few years. It is also not surprising that much of the attention is negative. Standing on the brink of the most severe economic and political crisis in the country's modern history, many guardians of that vaguely-defined notion of a "pure" Gaulic cultural identity—derived from the likes of Ernest Renan—have identified the immigrant-populated banlieues as an easy scapegoat for contemporary social ills. Echoing the logic of conservative rhetoric in the States, this position "naturally" associates hip-hop with the potential for an incipient revolutionary movement spearheaded by dispossessed urban youth. At the same time, however, corporate organs in France just as naturally consider those same youth as potential consumers. A cursory glance at the works cited list following this paper will give a good indication of the high stakes in the French hip-hop market: major labels like Mercury, Polydor, and Epic, in addition to a whole host of emerging (and highly competitive) labels such as Delabel, Bondage, Carrère, Musidisc, Squatt, etc. While only big names like MC Solaar and IAM are making their way into American record stores, discs and concert tickets for most of the artists discussed in this paper are widely available throughout France in stores like FNAC (roughly equivalent to Walmart in the States). Several magazines sold in France deliver the latest news from the recording industry: subsidized, of course, by advertisements for the very artists they feature, publications like L'Affiche spread the word not only on hip-hop, but also on related genres popular among urban youth, such as Rai, jungle, and break-beat (the subtitle for L'Affiche promises coverage of "autres musiques" [other musics]). Hip-hop has invaded the radio waves, as well, but the stations that carry programs featuring French and American rap (including SkyRock, Energie, Fin de Radio, Ado, and the new station Génération, which plays hip-hop exclusively) are all commercial stations which maintain close links with the corporate distributors of new sounds.

Even though there is not yet an "alternative" space on the radio such as public stations provide many hip-hop DJs in the States, an entire underground scene is flourishing in major French cities—gathering at dance clubs or house parties, or even in abandoned warehouses and the basements of high-rise apartment buildings (actually called "caves"). In Jean-François Richet's films about life in the banlieues, Etat des lieux (1989) and Ma 6-T va cracker (1997), this underground hip-hop scene is privileged as a nascent forum for organizing political and/or military revolution. On the unreleased soundtrack for Ma 6-T va cracker, a group of unsigned rappers combine their lyrics on one powerful track called "Contre les lois racistes" [Against the Racist Laws], in which a series of laws recently passed by the French state is criticized as racist legislation designed to deport immigrant families (and their French-born children). Richet himself, who performs the first rap in the song, urges listeners to react quickly by demanding the repeal of these laws (including those known as Loi Defer, Loi Joxe, Loi Pasqua, and Loi Debret). Another rapper denounces French voters who supported the wife of Bruno Mégret (a leader of the fascist party in France, the National Front) in the most recent mayoral election in the town of
environments while simultaneously affirming the transnational capital — thus adapting the form to the exigencies of specific production works of ideological/aesthetic affiliation enabled by this global music.

reproduce) the hip-hop disseminated as commodities by corporate ability for artists in different social contexts to poach on (rather than to transformations on the local level such as those I have outlined here in a French context. Only in this way might there remain a theoretical possibility for artists in different social contexts to poach on (rather than to reproduce) the hip-hop disseminated as commodities by corporate capital — thus adapting the form to the exigencies of specific production environments while simultaneously affirming the transnational networks of ideological/aesthetic affiliation enabled by this global music.

If hip-hop is to succeed — whether in France or in any other country — in providing a forum for articulating the networks of an oppositional “nation” (such as that which it seems to have become for many artists in the States), it seems to me that it must continue to undergo transformations on the local level such as those I have outlined here in a French context. Only in this way might there remain a theoretical possibility for artists in different social contexts to poach on (rather than to reproduce) the hip-hop disseminated as commodities by corporate capital — thus adapting the form to the exigencies of specific production environments while simultaneously affirming the transnational networks of ideological/aesthetic affiliation enabled by this global music.

Notes
1 Break dancing, graffiti tagging, and rap music all developed as integral components of what has become known as “hip-hop culture.” As this essay will focus specifically on the music itself, I will use the term “hip-hop” as it is used by most rappers today: to designate the musical form (unless otherwise stated). Bazin provides the most comprehensive study of the music in relation to the first two forms of so-called “street art.”

2 As Shusterman points out, appropriative sampling is an accepted part of the genre, but there is a fine line between “appropriate” appropriations and outright cannibalism, a line which (once transgressed) qualifies an artist (in hip-hop parlance) as a “cross-over,” someone only in “the game” for commercial profit. How this line comes to be crossed, challenged, negotiated, and redrawn in different contexts will be the subject of this essay.

3 For a sampling of the broad range of ideological positions and disciplinary approaches to this trend, see Appadurai’s cultural analysis, Huntington’s disturbing propositions for political scientists, Jessop’s application of systems theory to the problem, and Lyotard’s philosophical study on the computerization of knowledge.

4 De Certeau formulates the notion of textual poaching in The Practice of Everyday Life, ch. 12; for another practical application of this theory to the analysis of cultural texts, see Jenkins’ interpretation of Star Trek fanzines in Textual Poachers.

5 Throughout the paper, an album name for cited lyrics will be given only if there are more than one album by the given artist(s) in the list of Works Cited (otherwise, only a track name is given). Songs which have not been signed to any label will be identified as “unreleased.”

6 Certainly, this claim can be and has been contested by the authors of the poached texts. Indeed, rap has initiated a wave of court cases which have raised heretofore unasked questions concerning what exactly constitutes intellectual property (and thus what can be considered copyright infringement). An adequate discussion of the ways such cases have forced legal discourse to specify (and sometimes contradict) the tenets of private property would require a book-length project in itself.

7 For a web site with an extraordinary amount of links to various organizations and hip-hop artists who support the 5% Nation, see http://sunsite.unc.edu/

8 “Cream” is a hip-hop term for money, but this also refers to a song on their first album, “C.R.E.A.M.,” an acronym for “Cash Rules Everything Around Me.”

9 These “suburbs” should not be equated with the pristine lawns and two-car garages evoked by the American term. These peripheral zones of French cities were targeted by the French state in the 1960’s and 70’s for the construction of low-rent, high-rise housing complexes called HLM (Habitations à Loyer Modéré), and are inhabited primarily by disenfranchised immigrants and their children.
10 All translations of French lyrics are my own. I have opted to use “cream” here instead of “cash” or “money,” because the French word used to express this concept, “l’oseille,” is a street slang term not comprehensible (as a referent to “l’argent”) to most mainstream French listeners.

11 Goudaillier tells us that “looker” means “regarder” ‘to look at, to watch’ (123), but here the passive form of the verb along with “à” (“looké à la...”) seems to indicate something more along the lines of “styled after,” or “similar in appearance to.”

12 For some insightful socio-linguistic analyses of BVE, see Ogbu (who has worked extensively with populations in different geographic areas), Eberhardt, Labov, and Wolfram.

13 The word used in the rap to refer to “devil” is “shatan” (instead of “diable”), a term which comes from North African dialects of Arabic, and which will not be known to a mainstream audience.

14 For the most helpful attempts at conceptualizing verlan as a cultural phenomenon, see Bachmann and Basier, Fielder, Goudaillier, and Lefkowitz.

15 “poches” is transformed into “chepos”

16 “pêzes”: “monnaies,” “pieces d’argent.”

17 “cadeau” is transformed into “deau-ca”

18 “kiffer”: “aimer” ‘to love’ (fr. Arabic “kif”: mixture of hashish and tobacco)

19 In the song, “chepos” is used here, a syllabic inversion of “poches” (‘pockets’).

20 The original “pêzes” is a street slang term which is not widely known among speakers of standard French.

21 Original “deau-ca” is a verlan-ization of “cadeau” (‘present’).

22 Translated from “kiffer”: “aimer” ‘to love’ (fr. Arabic “kif”: mixture of hashish and tobacco).

23 In fact, the more recent of these films was temporarily banned from French theaters after it had been showing for three days, on the grounds that it advocated urban violence (Interview with Richet in Chicago, Oct. 1997).

Works Cited


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