ARTISTIC EXPRESSIONS OF ANTI-RACISM IN FRANCOPHONE BELGIAN RAP MUSIC: POSTCOLONIALITY, POLITICS, AND (MULTI)CULTURAL IDENTITIES IN HIP HOP CULTURE

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor in Political and Social Sciences
by

Axel Mudahemuka Choba GOSSIAUX

under the supervision of Marco Martiniello

Jury members:

Alice ATERIANUS-OWANGA
Assistant Professor at Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Neuchâtel

Jérôme JAMIN (thesis committee member)
Professor at Department of Political Science, University of Liège

Marco MARTINIELLO (promoter)
Professor at Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Liège

Christophe PIRENNE (jury president)
Professor at Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, University of Liège

J. Griffith ROLLEFSON (thesis committee member)
Professor at Department of Music, University College Cork

Proofreader: Colin HARPER, Belfast Proofreading

Academic year 2025-2026

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Abstract

Starting from the observation that hip hop, including rap music, has been an unavoidable phenomenon in recent decades and is a social object evolving within a particularly racialized framework, the research questions the artistic expressions of Francophone Belgian rap music in relation to racism and racial discrimination in Belgium. In a context of resurgent postcolonial debate, the aim is to investigate the political dimension of Francophone rap in relation to these issues. While it is now commonplace to say that rap music can have a certain political scope, many actors and outside observers wonder about its evolution following the integration of rap into a globalized, capitalist music industry. I therefore pose the following general research question: "What is the political dimension of Francophone Belgian rap in relation to issues of racism in modern societies?"

This qualitative study takes place at the intersection of a diverse theoretical framework, drawing from political sociology, ethnic and migration studies, postcolonial and cultural studies, and hip hop studies. It specifically employs critical theory of racism to examine how the phenomenon operates as a social construct and to investigate rap music's role as a political platform. The research also addresses broader issues, including (multi)cultural identity, market recognition, and artistic institutionalization. The analysis relies on three interdependent angles, studied in a transversal way, and structured around a chronological perspective that covers three periods (1984–1992, 1993–2007, 2008–2021), each representing a certain cycle of development of Francophone Belgian hip hop culture and rap music, allowing consideration of their historical evolutions. The methodology is qualitative and uses fieldwork material comprising songs, visual content, interviews, in-depth participatory experiences and observations, as well as archive material and sub-case studies of hip hop and rap-related initiatives in Brussels and Liège. I rely also on my insider position in the field in Liège.

The key findings of the research relate to the identification of the spaces where the political dimension of race in Francophone Belgian hip hop's politics can evolve, the racialized assignment of Francophone Belgian rap to a minority practice in the cultural landscape, and the institutionalization of hip hop within a cultural policy for the purposes of state action. Indeed, the first part of the chronological analysis (1984-1992) shows how Belgian pioneers of hip hop arts and culture could build and affirm cultural identity by locally appropriating rap music in

Francophone Belgium to engage in the global dialogue of marginalized voices. The second part (1993-2007) highlights the emergence of the Francophone Belgian rap music art world and how rap music artists could use its aesthetic codifications and conventions to challenge racism and discrimination. This part also underlines the limits of the institutionalization of hip hop arts and culture in the youth cultural policy, as well as those of their commodification in Francophone Belgium in the pre-Web 2.0 era. The last part of the chronological analysis (2008-2021) concerns mainly the new configuration of Francophone Belgian rap music leading to its full integration into the music market, and how this context raises issues about the articulation of its "political" discourse related to postcolonial debate in Belgium, while being nowadays acknowledged as a commodified and popular cultural good.

Acknowledgments

While, as is the case for many, conducting my doctoral research felt like a long journey fraught with uncertainty, the certainty that I would reach the end never wavered. I would like to express my gratitude to everyone I met along the way who helped me discover this path, mark it out, and make it passable. My thanks go immediately to the University of Liège and to the Sector Council for research and valorization in Human Sciences for awarding me a three-year doctoral fellowship. Granted shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic, this funding gave me the peace of mind I needed to devote myself fully to launching and conducting this research.

First, I would like to express my warmest thanks to Marco Martiniello, my thesis supervisor, for suggesting that I explore a topic that, although of paramount importance, has received little attention in the Belgian academic landscape. His welcome at the Centre for Ethnic and Migration Studies (CEDEM) provided me with a stimulating, open, and high-quality working environment. His open-mindedness, patience, expertise, and trust were crucial throughout this journey. I would also like to thank Jérôme Jamin, member of the Doctoral Advisory Commitee, with whom I had previously completed my master's thesis. His supportive guidance, insightful comments and questions helped to strengthen the framework and coherence of this work, from start to finish. My deepest gratitude also goes to J. Griffith Rollefson, member of the Doctoral Advisory Commitee, whose work on hip hop arts and culture has been a major source of inspiration in my intellectual journey, and whose thoughts and encouragement pushed me to further deepen the hip hop knowledge I sought to develop. I would also like to express my sincere thankfulness to Alice Aterianus-Owanga and Christophe Pirenne for agreeing to evaluate this work as members of the Examination Committee. Their expertise and keen insight will undoubtedly further enrich the reflections and perspectives presented in this study.

I would also like to thank all my colleagues at CEDEM, the Faculty of Social Sciences, and the University of Liège whom I have had the opportunity to meet along the way and with whom I have sometimes collaborated on various research projects and activities, contributing in one way or another to the development of the thinking behind my thesis. I would also like to thank the colleagues from other universities, research networks, or public organizations, with whom I have had the opportunity to work on various projects, notably the European Hip Hop Studies Network founded by Sina Nitzsche.

Of course, all my gratitude also goes out to hip hop, its arts, its cultures, its movements, and its audiences. I give a special shout-out to all the artists, actors, entertainers, and activists with whom I had the chance to collaborate, whether closely or from afar, starting with my own crews.

I would especially like to extend my heartfelt thanks to my mother, Antoinette Sekomo, my brother, Aurélien, my sister, Eve, and all my friends for the constant support they have given me, which was crucial to my ability to complete this work. I am also deeply grateful to my partner, Amélie, for always encouraging, supporting, and helping me at every moment and in every situation. Knowing that no matter what happened, I could always count on my family has been a source of unlimited determination.

Finally, I dedicate this study to my beloved father, Pol Pierre Gossiaux, who has always been my greatest source of inspiration. His spirit remains with me always, illuminating the darkest paths and guiding me toward the decisions that the heart and reason impose.

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Introduction

In 2017, the "R&B/hip-hop" category was, for the first time, identified as the most listened-to musical genre in the USA. Roughly 45 years after its big bang in the Bronx, Nielsen Music's *2017 Year-End Music Report*[1] shows this category as "the most dominant genre in the US, with nine of the Top 10 most-consumed songs coming from that genre" (*Nielsen Music* 2018: 2), albeit the "rock" genre still dominated the ranking of physical and digital album sales (Louis 2017). These trends continued in 2019 and showed hip hop reaching the top of the "total volume by format and genre" with almost 28% of the latter total volume while being shared with 12 other musical genres (*Nielsen Music* 2020: 35). Rock was still dominating both physical and digital album sales[2] while R&B/hip hop dominates streaming formats, gathering 30% of the volume generated for streams. Regarding the global music market, as early as 2009 hip hop tracks comprised half of the Top 10 global digital singles, as reported by the IFPI (International Federation of the Phonographic Industry) (Morgan and Bennett 2011: 176). For 2018, the IFPI reported four R&B/hip hop artists among "Top 10 Global Recording Artists," with the top place attributed to the rapper Drake (IFPI 2019). Additionally, there is an explicit mobilization of hip hop culture and its artistic disciplines in a multitude of different markets and economic sectors (e.g., advertising, tourism, fashion and clothing, footwear, cosmetics, automotive, telephony, various food products) and by a multitude of different brands (Darby 2020; Bertot 2021: 21).

Such a scenario could hardly have been anticipated almost 45 years after the so-called "big bang of hip hop," which occurred in August 1973 with the legendary first block party, organized by DJ Kool Herc in the South Bronx (New York) to launch his own party organization business. Indeed, the origins of hip hop arts and culture (hereafter abbreviated to "hip hop") can be traced to this event crystalizing the introduction of the Jamaican sound system practice, which offered a way for people to experience music and dance through cheap or free outdoor parties. Indeed, by importing the Jamaican sound system culture to New York, DJ Kool Herc provided an affordable alternative to expensive nightclubs. This initiative laid the foundation for hip hop, fostering both the creation of its musical and dance elements. As it spread, hip hop culture was

[1] Nielsen is an American company specializing in marketing and audience analysis. It is considered one of the leading sources of information and data on the music industry in the US and publishes reports on the state of the music industry.

[2] For example, the rock genre takes 42% of the physical album sales while R&B/hip hop, "pop," and "country" take around 10% each.

quickly seen as a possible alternative to the realities of daily life in disadvantaged and discriminated neighborhoods in the US and to the gang violence resulting. In Los Angeles, "gangsta rap" became the dominant form of hip hop before rapidly becoming a major trend in global rap music and then an imaginary that can be mobilized for the purposes of consumer culture. For instance, one of its pioneers, the rapper Ice T, took part in a 2025 advertising campaign for Lipton Tea (a subsidiary of Benelux). The campaign used a well-known expression from rap music, "OG" for "original gangsta," featuring Ice T promoting a drink presented as the brand's "original iced tea."

In Belgium, a hip hop movement emerged in the early 1980s, embraced by young people who identified with its cultural and artistic practices and sought to develop and promote their own cultural identity. The end of the decade saw the release of the first rap hit single in the French language, "*Vous êtes fous!*" ["You Are Crazy!"] by Benny B. Other artistic works played a decisive role in the evolution of the movement in Belgium, such as the compilation *Stop the Violence* by the Brussels Rap Convention (BRC) collective, various projects linked to the Brussels-based group De Puta Madre, and albums by the Liège-based group Starflam in the 1990s and early 2000s. Around 2010, a new generation of artists from the rap scene and urban contemporary music began to emerge, such as the singers Stromae and, more recently, Lous and The Yakuza. In 2021, the rapper Damso was, for the third time in his career, acknowledged as the most streamed Belgian artist within Belgium (*Belga News* 2021) and his album *QALF Infinity* was in the global Top 10 most listened music projects on the leading streaming platform Spotify the week after its release (*Booska-P* 2021). These few elements show that hip hop has been integral to the Belgian cultural landscape for some decades, with the Kingdom boasting a considerable number of active artists and participants. Nevertheless, the beginning of a widespread public recognition of hip hop culture and rap music as an art form in its own right, and of equal interest to other (older) disciplines or genres, was slow to emerge in Belgium when compared, for example, to the situation in France.

Hip hop culture and rap music are well known for providing a social commentary platform for both artists and audiences, playing an evidently significant role in the artistic and cultural landscape of post-migration cities and representing a form of expression for ethnicized and racialized communities and their descendants in Western countries, as well as for other groups. An examination of developments during its more than 50-year history reveals the main contemporary evolutions of the hip hop scene in Belgium and raises initial questions: Has

Belgian hip hop and rap music progressed from its underground roots to become a mainstream phenomenon? Did the public authorities encourage or discourage the emergence and development of hip hop in Belgium? Over the years and since its commercial success, how did hip hop's potential for protest and social criticism develop and materialize?

An overly reductionist approach to such questions may be too simplistic. Indeed, while hip hop culture and rap music are acknowledged to develop within a particularly racialized framework and to promote a kind of social consciousness stemming mainly from the experiences of and resistances to racism and discrimination faced by African American communities in the US, hip hop, and particularly rap music, has undeniably become an industry in its own right, allowing some people to become massively wealthy by aligning the codes of the movement with the rules of the capitalist market. The general artistic approach and various social commentary messages conveyed by the American rapper Kendrick Lamar, for example, provide insights into this tension in hip hop between "authenticity" and "commerce," between "culture" and "the pursuit of profit." This apparent tension, or even contradiction, appears to me to reflect quite well the capacity in hip hop to crystallize all aspects of modern societies, thereby becoming a kind of mirror to them.

Over recent years, tragic events in several countries have brought the realities of racism and contemporary racial discrimination back into public debate, with the primary goal of ensuring that these issues can no longer be denied in modern postcolonial and post-migration societies. Indeed, structural racism is currently an important part of the worldwide conversation about racism, with numerous research studies on the subject; it provokes a great deal of passion, heated debate, radicalized or consensual positioning, and initiatives of all kinds, whether civic, political, artistic, etc. Belgium is no exception and seems to be experiencing greater awareness of the scale of the phenomenon within its borders. In relation to the specific context of the country, the colonial past in Central Africa and the migratory movements since the end of World War II are given particular attention in the analysis of inequalities produced by contemporary forms of racism and discrimination. In July 2020, the House of Representatives created a special parliamentary commission on the colonial past, to initiate a reflection on the Belgian colonial period and draw conclusions about its contemporary impact. Unfortunately, the commission ended in failure and no conclusions or recommendations were voted on due to the opposition of certain political parties. Despite the imperatives of transparency that are supposed to characterize the workings of a democracy, the political blocking of this final report and its

potential consequences is example of the deep unease present in Belgium about its colonial past.

The main objective of this research is to examine the political expressions of Francophone Belgian rap music related to issues of racism and racial discrimination. This allows addressing the initial questions raised above by using the phenomenon of racism as the guiding line of the analysis. I am thus interested in exploring the political implications of hip hop and rap music in Francophone Belgium as cultural and artistic objects, with the issue of racism and racial discrimination as the central theme. Accordingly, I seek to answer the research question: "What is the political dimension of Francophone Belgian rap music in relation to racism in modern societies?"

The theoretical framework draws on various fields, including political sociology, ethnic and migration studies, postcolonial studies, and cultural studies, at the crossroads of which we find works from hip hop studies that help to analyze the political significance of global and local artistic and cultural practices. Therefore, the qualitative study uses critical race theory to understand racism as a social construct and investigates how rap may serve as a political platform for ethnicized and racialized minority groups in the Belgian postcolonial context. It also considers broader topics like cultural identity, market recognition of ethnicity, artistic legitimization and institutionalization, and the role of globalization. By examining the political dimension of an international cultural and artistic phenomenon that has reached the stage of industrial consumer goods, this research aims also to highlight the role of arts and culture as a tool for understanding societal dynamics, to contribute to improving theoretical discourses and public action on these issues.

While I focus primarily on the political aspects and implications of the hip hop movement, the purpose is not to judge the nobility of the goals of those who use and claim hip hop as their own. The study does not seek to evaluate or define what hip hop and rap music are or should be or not be; rather, it seeks to understand how they can be created and promoted for political or commercial purposes, or both. Furthermore, in focusing on racism, I prioritize the empirical material data that are most revealing in relation to this issue, and the aim is not necessarily to revisit certain controversies that have been present in (global) hip hop since its foundation.

From this theoretical basis and initial considerations, I develop a qualitative methodology relying on three interdependent and interrelated angles of analysis, which are studied in a transversal way. The first one focuses on identifying and analyzing artistic expressions of Francophone Belgian rap music that address racism—questioning, for instance, the historical reproduction of racial hierarchies in Belgium and their consequences, colonialism, various policy issues at national and international levels, assertion of multiple cultural identity, and the promotion, defense of, and struggle for the recognition of hip hop in the Belgian cultural landscape. It is also about helping the identification of certain aesthetic codes of artistic creation in rap music and how racialization processes can be reappropriated for political purposes, for commercial ones, or by playing on a certain balance between the commodification of artistic works and the social contestation they may represent.

The second angle of analysis examines the response that a public policy made to the arrival of hip hop in Belgium and thus concerns the use of hip hop for the purposes of Francophone Belgian youth cultural policy. This public policy had a determining role in the development of hip hop, thus raising the issue of institutionalization of the latter within a specific field of State public action, as well as that of the recognition of hip hop and rap music as cultural and artistic practices. Other questions arise from this situation, such as why and how hip hop has been and continues to be used for youth policy purposes, and how this dynamic has influenced the evolution of the Francophone Belgian rap scene.

The third angle concerns the evolution of the general recognition of hip hop and rap music, as well as the development of its professionalization, with particular attention paid to the evolution of its commodification in Francophone Belgium. To this end, the concept of "art world" is applied to identify the specific interactions between different actors involved in the production of Francophone Belgian rap music. This perspective also allows us to identify the emergence and development of the notion of cultural and artistic authenticity in Francophone Belgian rap music and how it may inform about the framing of the political dimension in hip hop and rap music.

The fieldwork material comprises diverse types of data (e.g., artistic works and performances, interviews, archive material, and insider participatory experiences) and includes sub-case studies of hip hop projects in Brussels and Liège supported by public authorities. The issue of data interpretation and the general and specific translation of certain terms is addressed in the

methodological section. In this section, I also discuss certain elements relating to my own position in relation to the subject of study. The empirical analysis is then articulated through a chronological perspective divided into three periods (1984–1992, 1993–2007, 2008–2021), each illustrating a particular sequence in the evolution of Francophone Belgian hip hop culture and rap music. For the first two periods, one thematic chapter is dedicated to each angle of analysis. Given the interdependence of the analytical angles, the third period is presented in the form of two chapters. The general findings of the first two periods are presented as a transition to the following period, while those of the third period are integrated directly into the analysis of its chapters. The study's final section presents a synthesis of the main findings from the empirical analysis.

The outline of the thesis is then divided into four parts, three being for empirical analysis. The first part concerns the development of the theoretical framework and the research design. Its aim is to present the problematization of the politics of an artistic and social object such as hip hop culture and rap music. The notion of "political" and the concepts of "politics" are addressed in relation to their connection with the popular culture phenomenon of "hip hop" and the context in which it emerged. This highlights the centrality of the African American postcolonial experience in the development and evolution of hip hop, providing a better understanding of its success and rapid globalization. The phenomenon of racism is then explained and articulated in the context and considerations specific to this research, before the general hypothesis is presented. The general methodological choices, the delimitation of the field, and the collection of data are then explained prior to beginning the empirical analysis.

The second part initiates a chronological analysis of the field from the early 1980s to 1992. The analysis of this period highlights certain glocalization dynamics and shows how hip hop culture and rap music began to be received, appropriated, and interpreted in Francophone Belgium in a process of cultural identity formation, mainly by individuals belonging to racialized minority groups and/or expressing a form of solidarity with and drawing inspiration from the postcolonial African American experience. The establishment of the concept of authenticity in the emerging Francophone Belgian hip hop scene is then addressed, followed by detailing the first examples of the use of hip hop culture for public cultural action, and explaining the emergence of hip hop culture in Francophone Belgium. The general findings of this section are then summarized before moving on to an analysis of the subsequent period.

The third part continues the chronological analysis for the period 1993–2007. It shows how the pioneers of Francophone Belgian rap were able to translate, develop, and diversify it according to the context and opportunities available to them. The analysis also shows that the dominant approach in hip hop culture and rap music at that time was to promote messages and expressions of social criticism, particularly around racism, racial discrimination, and other inequalities. In addition, the central role played by certain public cultural policies in Francophone Belgium is analyzed to highlight the relationship between hip hop and the institutionalized sector of "sociocultural action" and "lifelong education." Finally, analysis of issues relating to the commodification and professionalization of Francophone Belgian rap music shows that, with a few exceptions, it was relatively "underground" during this period.

The fourth and final part of the empirical analysis covers the period 2008–2021. It shows how a new generation of artists has enabled Francophone Belgian hip hop and rap to establish a certain degree of recognition and popular legitimacy in the cultural sphere, thanks to foundations laid by the pioneers. The analysis of the institutionalization of hip hop and rap for public cultural action is continued, particularly around mobilizing the concept of "urban cultures" in these policies. Finally, the positioning of contemporary Francophone Belgian rap music around issues of racism is analyzed in the light of recent developments in the postcolonial debate in Belgium and worldwide.

The articulation between these different parts of the thesis makes it possible to answer its main questions in a sequential and chronological manner, allowing for back-and-forth movement between theoretical and conceptual considerations and the development of the qualitative analysis of the field. In doing so, an analysis of the political history of hip hop culture and Francophone Belgian rap music can be carried out, highlighting its position towards racism, inequality, and social justice.

Part 1

Theoretical framework and research design

To think of the politics of an artistic and social object:

Problematization, theoretical framings, and methodologies designed to address racism-related political mobilizations of hip hop in Francophone Belgium

Chapter 1

Problematic and literature review

This part of the research presents the construction of a theoretical framework and a research design for empirical analysis. Chapter 1 is thus concerned with the problematic (Section 1) and the literature review (Section 2), which is intended to grasp the initial issues and questions that arise when hip hop is considered in parallel with the persistence of racism in modern Western societies. In considering hip hop as a potential mirror to modern societies and sociopolitical dynamics and economics, it becomes evident that it plays an important role in the formation of youth identity in postcolonial contexts. This latter section also helps to provide an overview on the development and institutionalization of hip hop studies in the US and certain European countries, with a particular focus on Belgium.

Section 1

The cultural object "hip hop" as a mirror to modern societies

Following the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, USA, in spring 2020, police violence in States claiming to be egalitarian democracies has become prominent in the media and in public debate. In a globalized world where information circulates almost instantaneously, police violence, particularly racial violence, can no longer avoid exposure and criticism. While police violence and impunity in underprivileged neighborhoods is not a new phenomenon and "affects precarious and racialized people" (Galaski 2020: 5), a crisis context like that of COVID-19—resulting in restrictive measures regarding rights guaranteed in laws in "normal" times and increasing State surveillance—shows that there is a significant risk that such violence increases generally. This amplified visibility of police violence has brought back the question of racism and its related issues (e.g., colonialism, discriminations, racialization processes, social cohesion) in modern societies, as well as the question of the fight against it. According to Achille Mbembe (2020: n.p.):

> The public execution of George Floyd in the midst of a deadly pandemic is no simple coincidence […] certainly, the death of a black man because of the action of a virus is not exactly the same thing [but] despite of all that separates them, anti-black racism has always had a viral dimension, and every virus has, as if by definition, an eruptive dimension.

In 2021, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights delivered a report, in accordance with the Human Rights Council resolution 43/1 adopted as a matter of urgency. It begins:[3] "The murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020 and the ensuing mass protests worldwide have marked a watershed in the fight against racism." In 2001, Belgium signed the Durban Declaration[4] and made a commitment to the UN to adopt a National Action Plan against Racism. Belgium being a federal state, the plan is to be designed and deployed on an inter-federal basis. The federal-level measures of this plan were adopted by the Council of Ministers in July 2022. In 2019, Unia (or the Interfederal Center for Equal Opportunities), the independent public institution promoting equal opportunities in Belgium, recorded the highest number of cases opened for racism, illustrating "the systemic and structural nature of racial discrimination" (Unia 2020: n.p.), while Belgium testifies to a late emergence of the postcolonial debate (see below).

The killing of George Floyd and the responses that followed demonstrated the need to question human rights and the persistent inequalities in so-called "democratic" societies. In this context, several Francophone Belgian artists evolving in artistic disciplines affiliated with hip hop gave support in various ways to this willingness to raise awareness and mobilize about these issues. These artists are not the only ones in Belgium to have called for a certain mobilization in relation to racism, but what interests me here firstly is their belonging to genres that emerged from hip hop.

For examples, the graphic artist Nova Dead[5] dedicated a mural to George Floyd in mid-June 2020 at the intersection of the Laeken municipality and District North in Brussels. The artist explained that he hopes this "message of love" "will be a reminder of this useless violence, of this absurdity" (Chini 2020: n.p.). In the same period, the Brussels collective CNN, pioneers of

[3] The aim was to "prepare a comprehensive report on systemic racism, violations of international human rights law against Africans and people of African descent by law enforcement agencies, especially those incidents that resulted in the death of George Floyd and other Africans and people of African descent, to contribute to accountability and redress for victims; to examine government responses to anti-racism peaceful protests, including the alleged use of excessive force against protesters, bystanders and journalists, to be submitted to the Council at its forty-seventh session" (Human Rights Council 2021: 1).

[4] "Durban" refers to a World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance organized in 2001 in Durban, South Africa. The Durban Declaration and Program of Action is the outcome document and encompasses comprehensive measures to fight racism and discrimination in the participant nation states (UN 2023).

[5] Nova Dead (Julien Crevaels) is well known in the Belgian graffiti and street arts scenes for pieces including a portrait of Nelson Mandela in the Outremeuse district in Liège (2018) and the monumental mural "The Future is Europe" at one of the main vehicle entrances to Brussels.

hip hop in Belgium, painted a mural on a legal wall near Brussels dedicated to George Floyd.[6,7] Using the slogan "Black Lives Matter," the rapper Hamza stated: "It's not normal that our black brothers and sisters are still being treated this way today! RIP George Floyd and all the people who died in police blunders! The list is getting longer and longer!"[8] The singer/rapper Lous and the Yakuza called on her fan community to participate in the June 7 protest against racism and police violence organized in Brussels by the Belgian Network for Black Lives in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement (BN4BL 2020) and gathering more than 10,000 people, according to the police. The Brussels rapper Damso and his crew participated in the same protest relatively anonymously to support the movement and seemingly to encourage their community to do so (*Team Mouv'* 2020), releasing a song on the subject a few months later called "MEVTR" (see Chapter 12).

Following Steve Gadet (2010: 82) having claimed "The Hip Hop movement is a mirror that reflects us, that reflects our society with its more or less embarrassing aspects and its constant quest for profit," I think hip hop can in some way crystalize, even exacerbate, social and societal dynamics. Indeed, when I began to work on hip hop studies in relation to political sociology, cultural studies, and critical race and ethnicities studies,[9] and drawing on my own insider experience, I thought hip hop would be a precious tool to analyze modern societal evolutions, changes, and issues related specifically to racism. Thus, speaking of the many controversies and debates around some sub-genres and aspects of this movement, I think that "[b]laming artists means running away from our responsibilities, especially those of the media moguls" (Gadet 2010: 82). Nevertheless, as the Brussels rapper and cultural actor Pitcho told me during a radio interview in Liège in 2012, one should also not deny the individual responsibility of artists in these controversies and in what could be considered as threats to the "cultural integrity" of the movement. The rapper and music producer Akhenaton, pioneer of French hip hop with his band IAM, concurs with these thoughts. According to him (in Oury 2015: n.p.):

> Rap is a mirror of the society in which it exists. Neither more nor less, we should not look for any explanation in what rap can generate. Rap corresponds to the reality of our country. In this

[6] See *cnn199officiel* (2020), "Georges [sic] Floyd tribute by CNN199."

[7] In addition, the graffiti artist Seyar (particularly known for monumental pieces) and another writer, from Berlin's globally recognized 1UP graffiti crew, came to Liège to realize a whole train carriage on Belgium's public railway with the inscription "Please, I can't breathe" (*RTBF* 2020a).

[8] See SAUCEGOD® (@HamzaSauceGod) (2020), "May 31, 2020."

[9] See my 2016 political science master's thesis in French: "Quelle est la dimension politique de la culture hip-hop durant les années Obama?"

> respect, rap is modeled on the capitalist model, it responds to demand immediately, much more quickly than other cultures. Apparently, people are asking for this type of hip hop, and artists are adapting and giving what people want.

Indeed, international success and growth of commodification and media attention devoted to the rap scene is the latest major evolution of Belgian hip hop (Quittelier 2015: 1). This brings us to the question of the commodification of rap music since there is no doubt that "hip hop" has become a capitalist industry, allowing some people to become massively rich by making the codes of its arts and cultures correspond to the rules of the market. Belgium is no exception to this since certain rap artists have managed to reach several recorded music markets and are conducting their careers within for-profits companies. They have a relatively high level of popular attention in the cultural and media spheres in Belgium and elsewhere. This shows the impact that hip hop can have on a market economy and how it is part of mainstream society. Such popularization and commercial industrialization of a culture born of marginal conditions is interesting for the study, as it seems "nearly impossible to travel the world without encountering instances of hip hop music and culture […] Hip-hop is everywhere!" (Morgan and Bennett 2011: 176). This "trans-global phenomenon" (Miller et al. 2014: 6) is "a common reference for many social groups, a reference that can also be mobilized in a wide range of economic sectors" (Lafargue de Grangeneuve 2008: 65) and is a social object that can provide an "intellectually productive and (not unimportantly) enjoyable framework" (Jaffe 2014: 698).

The scientific analysis of hip hop in Belgium is underdeveloped even if some encouraging initiatives have been undertaken in the past year. Participating in this nascent movement of conducting and maybe institutionalizing hip hop studies in Belgium, one broad ambition of my research would be to capture some interactions between arts and politics through the Belgian hip hop scene, with the belief that it could contribute to a better understanding of some social and cultural transformations of modern globalized societies.

These initial contextual developments serve to highlight the main elements of the problematic at the basis of the research. Indeed, if hip hop culture and rap music seem to have acquired the status of consumer goods in popular culture worldwide, what about their proposal to provide a platform for contestation and social commentary, aimed primarily at the most marginalized populations, and, more specifically, their relationship to the persistence of racism in modern societies? In this regard, the following quote by Gadet (2010: 85) articulates how I perceive the

object hip hop for the framing of my general problematic and leads me to develop the literature review:

> The capitalist industry has helped to build bridges between the youth of the world, but on the other hand, Hip Hop has become a cultural product recuperated by the conglomerates who sell 'rebellion' back to those who are the main actors in the first place. The economic aspect has marginalized the political and activist aspect of Hip Hop culture by changing the standards of the movement in the eyes of the masses.

Section 2

Hip hop arts and culture as a globalized object for social and political sciences: Youth identity formation in postcolonial settings

One of the most important findings from the scholarly literature dedicated to hip hop concerns its potential political aspects, which are strongly linked to questions of identity formation processes. In the mid-1980s in the US, when the first hip hop hits were already certifying the genre's existence as a distinct cultural entity (Fernando Jr 2000 [1992]; Rose 1994; Chang 2005), many critics saw it as a passing fad (Miller et al. 2014: 6). As recalled by Jamina Mertens et al. (2013: 93), "[h]ip-hop has widely been neglected by the political and social elite, who turned a blind eye to the subculture given its negative image of violence, drugs, social backwardness, and misogyny." Today, hip hop is still "the object of many received ideas" notably because of its "tumultuous history" (Pecqueux 2009: 10).

The development of hip hop studies in the US and the publication of various research studies questioning it outside of the US[10] has allowed the counterbalancing or invalidating of the stigmatizing considerations around it.[11] The multidisciplinary research field of hip hop studies has developed concomitantly with the integration of hip hop as a central element of American popular culture.[12] As Forman (2004: 3) highlights in the introduction to *That's The Joint! The*

[10] George Lapassade and Philippe Rousselot (1990), Hugues Bazin (1995), Alain Lapiower (1997), a whole volume of the revue *Africultures* (1999), books, book chapters and papers from Tony Mitchell (2001); Alain-Philippe Durand (2002); Dipannita Basu and Sidney Lemelle (2006); Karim Hammou (2014) [2012]; Sina Nitzsche and Walter Grünzweig (2013); Marco Martiniello (2015a); Justin A. Williams (2015); Alice Aterianus-Owanga (2017); J. Griffith Rollefson (2017); Elham Golpushnezhad (2018).

[11] The well-documented bibliographic guide *Hip-Hop Studies: An International Bibliography and Resource Guide* provides a massive overview of research interrogating hip hop culture around the world (Gray 2016). Travis Harris' "(Global) Hip Hop Studies Bibliography" (2019) paper is another work to consult as a good starting point about US and worldwide academic works regarding hip hop.

[12] Within the US, scholarly works that have given hip hop an academic foundation and legitimacy include Catherine T. Powell (1991); Tricia Rose (1994); Michael E. Dyson (1996); Murray Forman 1997 (2002); M.

Hip-Hop Studies Reader: "Analyzing, theorizing, and writing about hip-hop are also forms of cultural labor and should accordingly be regarded as consequential facets of hip-hop."[13] Indeed, the dynamics, processes, and activities involved in the institutionalization of hip hop studies in the US sought to provide a space in which the work of all those interested in it could converge.

An example of this dynamic can be found in the development of "a rich and vibrant site of inquiry" called "hip-hop based education" (HHBE) (Hill and Petchauer 2013: 1). This hip hop studies subfield is devoted to the analysis of hip hop as a pedagogical, educational, and training tool that has developed rapidly.[14] In "Framing and Reviewing Hip-Hop Educational Research" (2009: 947), Emery Petchauer underlines the basic ideas of HHBE related to identity formation among young people:

> The creative practices of hip-hop and the messages constructed in the music are woven into the processes of identity formation by which youth and young adults conceive of themselves, others, and the world around them (Chang, 2006; Dimitriadis, 2001; Ginwright, 2004; Petchauer, 2007a). This includes not only Black and Latino youth in the United States but other ethnicities as well (Iwamoto, Creswell, & Caldwell, 2007), including White youth (Kitwana, 2005). Processes of identity formation have the potential to be intricately woven into teaching, learning, and nearly all things educational.

As stated by Harris et al. (2022: 10), HHBE is a distinguishable subfield within hip hop studies, alongside other notable areas of research including "global Hip Hop studies, religion and Hip Hop studies, Hip Hop feminism, Hip Hop dance studies and Hip Hop linguistics." More recently, the founding of the *Journal of Hip Hop Studies* in 2012 has contributed to the institutionalization of hip hop studies in the US and elsewhere.[15] In 2017, the foundation of "The European HipHop Studies Network" by Sina Nitzsche contributed to the development and

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Forman and Marc Anthony Neal (2004), and Cornel West when trying his hand at rap music, releasing what was possibly the first rap album recorded by a university professor in the US (*Sketches of My Culture*, 2001).

[13] He underlines the fact that "hip-hop's first chroniclers" were actively involved in the growing hip hop culture, "circulating within the same social circles as the prime innovators and entrepreneurs, and they counted themselves among the earliest audience members who cohered at both formal and informal events" (2004: 3).

[14] Starting in the early 1990s, a community of education professionals and researchers quickly began to question and experiment with the use of hip hop in formal and informal learning contexts, such as primary, secondary, and higher education classes, extra-curricular activities, early childhood, neighborhood community and social work (Powell, 1991; Smitherman, 1997; Ibrahim, 1999).

[15] Discovering the existence of this scientific journal dedicated solely to hip hop was a significant benefit and inspiration when I was writing my master's thesis. As stated on its website: "The journal positions itself within Hip Hop culture and the Black Freedom Struggle. JHHS' role in the culture is to provide an opportunity for those who are both academic and Hip Hop to have a voice in academia" (*VCU Scholar Compass* 2023). This position is in line with Forman's idea of integrating and considering hip hop studies as an integral part of hip hop activities.

institutionalization of hip hop studies in Europe. In 2013, with Walter Grünzweig, Nitzsche co-edited *Hip-Hop in Europe: Cultural Identities and Transnational Flows*, the first collection of essays taking a pan-European perspective in the field.

Another important initiative in the institutionalization of hip hop studies in Europe and internationally is the ERC-funded CIPHER project,[16] begun in 2019. CIPHER, or The International Council for Hip Hop Studies, "is a public scholarship project mapping hip-hop knowledge from communities across the world" headed by J. Griffith Rollefson at University College Cork in Ireland. It comprises a team of international researchers based on three core values: "academically rigorous," "on the ground," and "for the culture."[17] CIPHER also supports the academic journal *Global Hip Hop Studies*,[18] which debuted in 2020. In their introduction to this issue, Adam Haupt and J. G. Rollefson (2020: 3) explain that "GHHS reaches out to hip hop heads, artists, activists and scholars both in and beyond the United States in order to embrace that fact that hip hop is a manifestly global and intercultural phenomenon that takes many creative and critical forms." They conclude by stating the journal's objective:

> Depending on which theoretical toolkit you prefer, you might say that GHHS is a decolonial project that is meant to implode the centre/margin periphery while trying to leverage off the resources that have been accumulated by the Global North both during the colonial era and with the onset of neo-liberal economics and the university's complicity in an unfair and fraught knowledge trade.

It is about going "beyond the 'ivory tower'" and other "scholarly contexts," as well as "the North/South divide," the "race/gender/class divides," and "the digital divide." In short, GHHS seeks to "build a global hip hop knowledge commons. Enter the cipher…" (2020: 9–10), or "Step Into Da Cipher," as per a 1994 song title by Brand Nubian, a pioneering New York rap band.

Hip hop studies is a field that can encompass many (sub-)disciplines in different academic contexts, such as political sociology, urban sociology, sociology of immigration, cultural

[16] The ERC (European Research Council) "is the premier European funding organisation for excellent frontier research. It funds creative researchers of any nationality and age, to run projects based across Europe" (ERC (n. d.), "ERC at a glance").

[17] See *Global Cipher* (n. d.), "What is CIPHER."

[18] See *Intellect Books* (n. d.), "Global Hip Hop Studies."

studies, communication studies, religious studies, anthropology, ethnic studies and ethnomusicology, critical race theory, psychology, economics, educational studies and more, like "a conglomerate of diversity that continues to grow in both scope, content and form" (Miller et al. 2014: 9). It is characterized by a very high level of interdisciplinarity, leading J. A. Williams (2015: 2) to say: "Despite our varied disciplinary backgrounds, hip-hop becomes our connecting point, and it then becomes a discussion point for matters like method and discipline."

This overview of the development and institutionalization of hip hop studies in the US and Europe allows us now to speak about connecting the artistic dimension to the social and the political dimensions (see below). Other works, not necessarily solely on hip hop, have made important contributions to understanding how the migration of arts can generate new cultural, sociopolitical, and economic configurations throughout a globalized world (Hesmondhalgh and Negus 2002; Bennett et al. 2005; Aidi 2014). Focusing on modern popular music, George Lipsitz's *Dangerous Crossroads* (1994) noted that:

> Transnational capitalism operates flexibly around the globe, leaving local or national forms of popular resistance and counterhegemonic organizing at a distinct disadvantage. Commercial music, however, travels relatively freely across borders and is a resource for communication, consciousness raising, and the exploration of new identities among disparate populations (Averill 1996: 116).

Global music would then manifest meaningful contemporary forms and expressions of resistance and contestation, both in terms of form and content. Jocelyne Guilbault (1997) identifies a key aspect of *Dangerous Crossroads* that makes it a major contribution to the field of popular music studies. This aspect concerns Lipsitz's focus on what he terms the "aggrieved populations." He posits that in a moment of profound change and reordering of world politics and global economy, "people from colonized countries long connected to global migrations, transformations, and change 'emerge as experts about displacement and the qualities needed to combat it'" (Guilbault 1997: 239).

The purpose of this work then is to "build the future by learning lessons from individuals and groups whose histories have prepared them to make productive use of contradictions, to embrace the dynamism of difference and diversity" (Lipsitz 1994: 177). Similarly, according to Paul Gilroy (2020: 19–21), one of the challenges would involve "the need for academic

circles to take black histories, analyses and cultural expressions seriously, so that they are not relegated, through the idea of 'race relations', to sociology and, from there, to the dustbin where insoluble political problems are promised certain death." This scholar is well known for his major contributions in cultural studies with the development of a conceptual model operating the William E. B. Du Bois' idea of "African American double consciousness" (see Chapter 3). This model is called the "Black Atlantic" and was developed in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), which "undoubtedly marks an important turning point in the study of Diasporas, and more generally in the study of identities emerging from postcolonial situations" (Chivallon 2002: 51).

Given these considerations, an investigation into identity formation and the development of postcolonial cultural identities in hip hop can begin with M. Forman's observation that hip hop culture can be regarded as "a whole way of life" (2010: 3; Gossiaux 2021a). In her seminal book about rap music and black culture in the early 1990s, T. Rose (1994: 21) highlights that

> [l]ife on the margins of postindustrial urban America is inscribed in hip hop style, sound, lyrics, and thematics […] [Hip hop] is the tension between the cultural fractures produced by postindustrial oppression and the binding ties of black cultural expressivity that sets the critical frame for the development of hip hop.

Speaking about rap music, Rose (1994: 102) explains that "more than any other contemporary form of black cultural expression, [it] articulates the chasm between black urban lived experience and dominant, 'legitimate' (e.g. neoliberal) ideologies regarding equal opportunity and racial inequality." Indeed, pioneers such as the DJ/producers Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa or the rap band Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five immediately mobilized the ideas and responses of the post-Civil Rights generation to the problems of poverty, drugs, police brutality, and other social and racial inequalities in post-industrial America (see below).

Due to its international success, hip hop was quickly mobilized in many countries by groups other than the American minorities at its origin. In Western Europe and Belgium, so-called immigrant populations very quickly recognized themselves in the artistic practices of hip hop, which could also be of interest to other groups within a given state. Indeed, some studies concluded that hip hop culture, beyond being a phenomenon of resistance to the dominant culture through artistic expression of resistances, could provide "a space through which [its

actors] attempt to insert themselves into society dominant, both in terms of identity and in social, political and economic terms" (LeBlanc et al. 20007: 10; de Villers 2005). Hip hop is a cultural ensemble often considered as comprising four historical disciplines, known as "elements": DJing, MCing, breaking, and graffiti writing. Nevertheless, following its massive international success, rap music, originally one component of hip hop culture, came to designate the whole of it. A brief definition of rap music can be presented here:

> Rap is the verbal and musical domain of hip-hop, an expressive oral form through which personal and social perspectives are amplified. It is a means of communicating a 'new worldview' (Kitwana, 2002: 9) that is shared by an entire generation of African Americans and, increasingly, non-Black citizens of the US as well as a growing international cohort (Forman 2010: 3).

One can then posit that hip hop arts and culture serve as illustrative examples of a phenomenon wherein "the 'global village' created by the new information technologies at least circulates forms of subversion at the level of world culture" (Colleyn 2021: 17). This phenomenon would have greatly helped the global commodification and massive industrialization of hip hop (Morgan and Bennett 2011). Thus, as highlighted by Benoît Quittelier (2014: 1), "the role that practices derived from hip hop culture can play in the identity-building of their audiences or practitioners and in the revitalization of its local dimension seems to be relatively well understood today, in the United States as elsewhere in the world."

More than 30 years after the emergence of (global) hip hop studies, it is clear that hip hop arts and culture are well known for offering multiple and diverse opportunities to ethnicized and racialized minorities, as well as other groups, to publicly express themselves about whatever they wish, including matters that could be considered as political: "The claim that hip-hop music and culture is somehow 'political' is a common one" (Deis 2015: 192). As Rose (1994) highlights, formal political participation (Hay 2007) and institutionalized politics was denied to these groups in post-industrial urban America. In considering the relationship between politics and popular culture (see Chapter 2), it can be assumed that throughout its history, hip hop has in some ways endorsed forms of "politics." "Political" hip hop would be rooted in hip hop since the beginning.

Migration studies show that the growing presence of ethnicized minorities and their descendants in some specific societal context in Europe qualified through "superdiversity" (Vertovec 2007),[19] or "everyday multiculturalism" (Harris 2013), have initiated questions related to cultural and national identities and imagined communities, as well as the possibility for these groups to take part in politics in post-migration societies (Martiniello 2015b). Relating these issues with hip hop brings one directly to confirm that it quickly became a politically and commercially powerful framework of expression and life path in which some people from racialized minorities in Europe might engage (Rollefson 2017). When talking about contemporary hip hop in European contexts, the institutionalization phenomenon occurring in several countries regarding hip hop artistic practices (e.g. France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, the UK, or Belgium) can be underlined (Nitzsche 2013); it is a phenomenon that demonstrates what seems to be an important interest from cultural policies in hip hop and/or so called "urban cultures" (Genard 2014).

In his contribution to the study of hip hop dance in Belgium, Didier Stiers (2007: 6–7) points out a "lack of written material and documentary research" about hip hop's artistic disciplines in Belgium: "Yet for many people, young and old, it is an important form of culture. A popular art form in its own right." Nowadays, despite few peer-reviewed studies specifically on Belgian hip hop,[20] the subject is at least established. For instance, in his contribution about Belgium in the *The SAGE International Encyclopedia of Music and Culture*, Alessandro Mazzola (2019: 5) underlines hip hop's impact on "urban cultures": "Ethnocultural diversity and international trends are also remarkable in the [Belgian] rap music scene […] Underground hip-hop, for example […] is an important vector for socialization above all in urban peripheries in Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels." In 2018, Alain Lapiower and Roland Van der Hoeven published a paper about the emergence of hip hop in Brussels from 1983–2010. B. Quittelier published a paper in 2015 studying the spatiality of the practice of breakdancing in Brussels, following a PhD thesis in 2014. Marco Martiniello published both a book chapter (2015) and a paper about rap, anti-racism, and local identities in the Liège region (2017a). In 2013, Jamina Mertens et al. published a paper studying the treatment of postcolonial memory by hip hop artists from

[19] In a 2021 paper, Steven Vertovec addresses the challenges associated with operationalizing the concept of "diversity" in the context of contemporary multicultural societies. He notes that the concept is inherently complex due to its "ambiguity, normativity, and polysemy," making it challenging to research and theorize effectively.

[20] While academic literature on Belgian hip hop is not yet developed, literature from not-for-profit organizations and public institutions is more abundant. This "grey literature" is mobilized in this research as archive material (see Chapter 4).

Congolese origins in Belgium. Other papers mentioning hip hop in Belgium include Fien De Malsche (2019: 71) focusing on "Millennials in Flanders and their use of and attitudes towards [the term *nigga*]," Martiniello (2016) discussing a few "Belgian urban artists," Nicole Grégoire and Jacinthe Mazzocchetti (2013) on collective responses of the "sub-Saharan" African diaspora in Brussels to situations of discrimination, and Johanna de Villers (2005) on the integration and identity-building of descendants of Moroccan immigrants in Belgium.

This overview of hip hop's current status in (Francophone) Belgium shows that the processes of identity formation and socialization within it and its urban environments is documented, demonstrating characteristics that could be perceived as politically charged. In "Glocal linguistic flows: Hip-hop culture(s), identities, and the politics of language education," Alim and Pennycook (2007) refer to the term "glocal consciousness" used by Mela Sarkar and Dawn Allen to underline a process of empowerment among youth of color involved in hip hop. They explain: "While identifying with Black American hip-hop resistance movements and the political consciousness of Black American activists (such as Malcolm X), these artists emphasize very local expressions of global theories of racialized oppression," before exemplifying this with the Brussels rapper Pitcho: "As Congolese-Belgian hip-hop artist Pitcho describes his engagement with hip-hop culture, it is not so much an end point as a starting point, a springboard for exploring a much wider world" (Alim and Pennycook 2007: 94). Similarly, Martiniello (2017a) highlights the dynamism of the hip hop scene by analyzing artworks of working-class rap artists in Liège[21] and shows how they express resistance to the neoliberal evolution of society in their local environment as well as rejecting racism. In "Congolese hip-hop in Belgium", Mertens et al. (2013: 108) concluded that "[t]he language of the postcolonial hip-hop scene is indeed at odds with the mainstream discourse on the Belgian colonial past." On that point, Rollefson (2017) made a major contribution with his book *Flip the Script: European Hip Hop and the Politics of Postcoloniality*, based on fieldwork in Berlin, London, and Paris, which laid the ground for the CIPHER project. Indeed, as the author explains, the book "makes the bold and transformational claim that in hip hop's sonic and rhetorical contours we can hear that African American 'double consciousness' is a particularized US form of a global postcolonial condition" (CIPHER 2018: 10).

[21] OHK [*Organisation Hors du Kommun*] and Starflam, in link with *Ultras Inferno 96*, a football team fan group of *Standard de Liège*, the famous local team in Liège and Belgium (see below).

These works help to illustrate how contemporary hip-hop-related studies in Europe demonstrate an acknowledgement that "immigrants who were dispossessed and forced to move to certain parts of Europe clung to and found their identity in Hip Hop because their story was present and a part of the collective consciousness of Hip Hop" (Harris et al. 2022: 19). Therefore, considering "the many events that contributed to the ciphas and flows (cultural interactions throughout the continent, transatlantic slave trade, multiple dispossessions, disenfranchisement, benign neglect and so on)," the issue would be "to get as close to this idea of a collective consciousness, not underground or conscious rappers" when trying to talk about "real Hip Hop" (Harris et al. 2022: 20). This collective consciousness would thus come from the living conditions of the post-industrial urban US highlighted by Rose (1994) and others.

In summary, considering hip hop culture and rap music as a global phenomenon in recent decades, knowing that it is the most consumed music in the world in the streaming era, and highlighting the particularly racialized framework in which such a social object can develop, I propose to investigate the artistic positions and expressions of Francophone Belgian rap music regarding racism and racial discrimination in Belgium. Focusing the analysis on these issues allows us to identify and examine a certain political dimension of Francophone Belgian rap music, in the context of the revival and recent developments in the postcolonial and racial debate in Belgium. While rap music is known for having a certain political significance, its immense success in the capitalist music market raises questions for certain actors about the evolution of its "political message." Accordingly, I formulate the following research question: "What is the political dimension of Francophone Belgian rap music in relation to racism in modern societies?" This can be broken down into sub-questions: "What stances can be highlighted in Francophone Belgian rap music regarding contemporary debates about racism in the West?"; "What similarities and differences can be identified between these expressions and the consensual public discourse on racism, as well as other forms of mobilization on this topic in the past and more recently?"; and "How may artists frame such a dimension in the specific context of Francophone Belgium regarding institutionalization, commodification, or legitimization?"

While hip hop arts and culture are interesting examples of redefinition of places and means of political action in a less conventional perspective and by non-professionals of politics (Martiniello 2017a: 164), the analysis of the link between arts and politics requires a framework built from theoretical and methodological choices. The literature review, built around political

and urban sociology, ethnic and migration studies, or postcolonial and cultural studies, and highlighting the interdisciplinary of hip hop studies, helps to frame the main elements of the research question and gives clues for analyzing the positioning of Francophone Belgian rap music with regard to the persistence of racism in modern societies. The first part of the research question thus addresses a certain political dimension, which I propose to outline using political sociology and to examine in areas such as socialization, practices, and behaviors that can be described as political, public action, social movements, or inequalities. Subsequently, linking the discussion of this political dimension to the issues of racism in Francophone Belgium allows one to draw on postcolonial studies. Belgian colonialism in Central Africa is explained, along with certain of its contemporary legacies, starting with racial discrimination and racism. The latter is addressed according to the critical theory of racism, which considers the concept of race to be a relationship, a social construct. Issues relating to processes of cultural identity construction or market recognition of ethnicity are also explored, as well as the legitimization of cultural practices considered marginal and their institutionalization in the field of cultural policy. The concept of globalization is also applied transversally as an important element of the analytical framework. Finally, choosing Belgian Francophone hip hop culture and rap music as a starting point for studying a political dimension linked to the phenomenon of racism brings migration studies to help examine how people from ethnicized and racialized minority groups can express themselves politically through arts in the specific postcolonial and post-migration contexts of Francophone Belgium.

It is therefore from the convergence of and at the intersection between these different literatures and concepts that I have developed the analytical framework for this qualitative study addressing the political dimension of race in the context of Francophone Belgian rap music.[22] Working on this topic contributes also to hip hop studies and further enriches their profoundly interdisciplinary stance with a case study from (Francophone) Belgium. The potential societal impact of this research would then be to facilitate a more effective usage and comprehension of the role of arts and culture in a multitude of political and social contexts, as well as in a variety of theoretical discourses pertaining to these matters. By highlighting the profound connections between art, culture, and societal structures, the work could help to foster a more nuanced and informed public discourse and action related to these matters and help the use of

[22] Additionally, several concepts and theoretical considerations borrowed from other fields, such as sociology of the arts and commodification studies, are mobilized specifically in the empirical section to enhance the analysis.

arts as a tool for social cohesion, political expression, and cultural democracy, while encouraging the development and professionalization of local artists.

The next part of the study is thus dedicated to the necessity of building a theoretical framework applicable to the empirical analysis.

Chapter 2
Talking about "politics" and "hip hop arts and culture"

In their introduction to "Art and politics under the gaze of social sciences", Hélène Dufournet et al. (2007: 3) state that "[t]he relationship between art and politics appears to be an object of study that is both classical and as yet little explored by the social sciences." Indeed, the figure of "the engaged artist" has marked the political life of the previous century and the notion of political engagement of artists has generated theorizations from the sociology of art (e.g., Becker 2010 [1982]; Reed 2005; Balasinski and Mathieu 2006). Political science has also studied cultural policies of states and sub-national entities since its institutionalization. Nevertheless, the interaction, the potential links, between these two dimensions appears to be insufficiently considered as "works generally focus either on artist engagement or on cultural policies" (Dufournet et al. 2007: 3). Therefore, following Martiniello (2017a: 164) stating that "it is highly relevant to study '*unidentified political objects*'[23] such as music from a perspective that is primarily political sociology" and through specific methodological and theoretical framings, I chose to analyze "hip hop culture" and "rap music" in relation to issues of racism in contemporary Francophone Belgium.

While hip hop culture is an important vector of identity formation at local and global levels, the same could be said for music in general. Thus, considering it as a general "idea vehicle" moving messages addressed and reflecting societies, "music, like all cultural objects and artefacts, is not immune to politics, in its various forms, with strong variations in time and space" (Gonin and Poirrier 2016: n.p.). Claiming that hip hop can be related to the political realm is a widespread view. It appears that "[t]he cultural power of rap as global protest music is undeniable" (Lusane 2004: 352). Nevertheless, to avoid some kinds of determinism and potential methodological and theoretical biases, I refuse "the commonly accepted idea that rap music and hip-hop are intrinsically carriers of a function of political resistance and protest engagement" (Aterianus-Owanga and Moulard 2016: 7). Hip hop music is not essentially political; rather, it is "organized within extremely vast and diverse musical scenes, and does not pursue a common, unified goal" (Aterianus-Owanga and Sonnette 2018: 54).

[23] See Denis-Constant, Martin (ed.) (2020), *Sur la piste des OPNI (Objets politiques non identifiés)*, Paris, Karthala (highlighted by the quoted author).

The word "essentially" is important, knowing that some cultural studies scholars "tend to exaggerate the political dimension of the arts and culture in general" (Martiniello and Lafleur 2009: 102), while many traditional political scientists tend to neglect it. For example, Mikaël Faujour (2021) shows how some artistic works presented as ruptures or resistances to neoliberal capitalism in museum exhibitions are, in fact, diffused through the classic ways of the art market in Western societies. My approach is to consider the analysis of the meaning and political relevance of popular and commodified arts in specific conditions, focusing not only on so-called "engaged" art but on a variety of artistic expressions with diverse purposes.

Therefore, following Christopher Deis (2015: 193) when trying to relate politics with arts and culture, I first ask within Section 1: "How do we define politics? And if hip-hop is in fact political, how do we locate it within a broader context for thinking about the relationship between politics and popular culture?" Then, considering the potential role of popular music regarding politics and, more generally, issues related to the legitimacy of nation states, I propose, following Lipsitz (1994: 138), that "ethnic or national minorities often create music that both affirms or denies their connections to the nation states that they sometimes seek to join more fully and sometimes seek secession from." Lipsitz gives as an example the Congolese independence leader Patrice Lumumba (see Chapter 12) using popular music in the late Belgian Congo to strengthen his position in negotiating independence in Brussels in 1959. Sections 2 and 3 develop the idea that hip hop can be politically articulated in defiance of state institutions and the nation state while enabling "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" (Lipsitz 1994: 137).

Section 1

Looking to "political" scopes of popular arts and culture: Institutionalizing the "political" outside of formal politics

The objective of this section is to clarify the notion of "political dimension" in the context of analyzing popular artistic practices. This then allows us to relate this political dimension to the specific object of "hip hop arts and culture." Political science and its sub-disciplines can help in understanding what we will perceive as "political" and how to mobilize a certain definition of it and the notion of "politics." Etymologically speaking, "politics" refers to the Greek word "*polis*," which designates "the city" in the modern sense of "the state." We can then understand

why Max Weber, questioning the political vocation and its meaning in a 1919 conference about "the profession and vocation of a political man," identified and further developed the following as part of the concept of politics: "the direction of the political entity that we call today 'State', or the influence that one exercises on this direction." Continuing on the state, Weber (1963: 124) specifies that "[t]his can be defined sociologically only by the specific *means*[24] that is proper to it, as well as to any other political entity, namely physical violence." Therefore, "the contemporary State must be conceived as a human community which, within the limits of a determined territory [...] successfully claims for itself *the monopoly of legitimate physical violence*"[25] (ibid.: 125).

This definition allows us to highlight two essential notions of the concept of politics: that of the human community and that of power, to which I will return later. Another way of approaching the broad concept of politics and the in-situ meaning of the political adjective is to divide it into different terms and significations in which the sub-disciplines of political science (e.g., political sociology, political theory and philosophy, public policy analysis, international relations) would take varying degrees of importance according to their relevance to the main political phenomena observed. In this framework, it may be helpful to retain three definitions based on grammatical features when discussing the political phenomenon, respectively linked with the notions of "politics" (1), "polities" (2), and "policies" (3) (Leca 2012; Grandjean 2015).

(1) *Politics* is the most common word referring to the adjective "political" and can be translated in French by "*la politique*." It is at core an activity, a struggle for power among the governing elites or among some groups, collectivities or forms of social mobilization that may influence the political agenda to exercise some power over the governance of societies. It is about studying what happens in the state, how and why it happens or the interactions of the state within its environments (Grandjean 2015: 5–6; Leca 2012: 61).

(2) *Polity* and *polities* ("*le politique*" in French) describe a kind of structure designed to facilitate harmonious co-existence among individuals within society. Indeed, it "describes a certain orderly arrangement of the material elements of a community and the spiritual elements that constitute its culture" (Burdeau, cited in Grandjean 2015: 5). It is thus a set of choices that

[24] Emphasized by the editor.
[25] Emphasized by the editor.

are considered collective. Additionally, the notion refers to the group of governing elites who will claim "a distinct and preponderant civil authority" for the governance of societies based on the concept of sovereignty (Leca 2012: 63).

(3) *Policies* ("*les politiques publiques*" in French) are productions from a political system aimed to act and to give answers to problems in any social activity sector. It is "the set of actions and decisions of a political system" (Grandjean 2015: 6). The purpose of public policy analysis is then to study "what happens when the state 'deals' with 'problems' in different 'sectors' and what the consequences are, intended or not, for the production and distribution of resources as well as for the satisfaction, rationally justified or felt without much reason, of the 'target populations', unified or not, in the same social situation or not" (Leca 2012: 61).

The delineation of these three sub-areas of politics enables a more concrete definition of the term. It also raises a common denominator, which is the question of the exercise of power over a human community, and implicitly, the legitimacy of the exercise of this power. This legitimacy is the basis for the monopoly of legitimate physical violence by a nation state. This initial theoretical examination of the concept of "political" allows us to examine conceptualizations of contemporary political engagement within the field of political science.

Today, while "traditional" forms of political participation in Western representative democracies (e.g., membership and partisan activism and loyalty, syndicalism, intellectualization of debates, electoral participation) are tending to decline—a certain "malaise with regard to political representation has spread quite widely" (Clément 2015: 123)—on the other hand, "democracies are becoming more and more expressive and more and more individualized" (Muxel 2010: 62). In 1998, Pascal Perrineau had noted in the French case two important processes in this new political participation. Firstly, "the repertoire of citizen action has opened up considerably, from responding to a survey to protesting in a violent demonstration, as well as the whole range of intermediate commitments." The repertoire of action within the category "youth" is particularly demonstrative of this phenomenon while it appears to be "more and more eclectic and bricolage." Secondly, "political commitment is marked by a profound process of individuation and personalization. The traditional commitments […] are being atomized and privatized." Perrineau goes on to say: "Many new forms of commitment, particularly among young people, are marked by this process of individuation which seems to characterize a 'post-politics', undergoing an evolution

comparable to that of morality, modernity or materialism, to which the same prefix has been assigned" (Perrineau 1998: 116).

Ronald Inglehart (1977) called this process "postmaterialism," seeing the individual "values of materialism" (economic values for the fulfilment of the individual's primary needs, considered more essential for survival than other needs) evolving in post-industrial societies towards other scopes of individual values and needs tinged with self-expression and autonomy. Indeed, postmaterialism can be understood as a diffusion of values that is analogous to a culture of individualization. This includes the empowerment of the individual, the pursuit of self-fulfillment and personal achievement, the freedom of expression, and the desire for recognition and belonging. Pierre Bréchon (2010) thought about the development of a culture of individualization throughout Europe. He stated: "Individualization is not individualism. It is the culture of 'to each his choice' and not of 'to each his own' [...] These choices are in no way automatic or simply determined in advance by social affiliations or the previous socialization of individuals," as each retains the right to experiment, "to experience what makes sense for him or her" in order to "have good reasons to act" before making up his or her mind (Bréchon 2010: 1–2). Political individualization means a greater rationalization of choices, implying more skills and politicization, but also a more critical profile that more easily accepts "protest-type actions, focused on specific objectives." This rise in political individualism would then reflect a more critical engagement profile, attentive to contexts and conjectures rather than to partisan loyalty or automated adherence to large ideological ensembles (ibid.: 5). This kind of observation contributes to an understanding of the growing loss of legitimacy and confidence that many people express in the effectiveness of representative political systems in meeting their needs, which is in turn leading to greater calls for more "direct democracy."

Therefore, as Pierre-Alain Clément (2015) highlights regarding the arts: "Engagement is increasingly defined and treated in a personal way, focused on local and limited action, or even the very idea of commitment is disqualified." These few developments reinforce the relevance of not focusing the analysis on so-called engaged artists or those who claim to be so. It allows the further development of an understanding of the "political" that encompasses politics, polity, and policies. Additionally, it facilitates examination of non-traditional forms of political participation, whereby an artwork in itself "can be understood as producing or participating in a political situation" (Clément 2015: 124). In *Why We hate Politics* (2007), Colin Hay develops

a definition of the political focus on agency and deliberation in collective choice situations. As Clément (2015: 124) explains:

> According to this definition, a wide range of activities fall under the umbrella of political participation, from speech to action, potentially violent, to forms of non-participation (boycott, electoral abstention) or 'everyday' conversations, as long as they serve to express 'exasperation, frustration, irritation or even ownership of formal political processes'. From this perspective, appropriating and contributing to public debate, including outside the public sphere, is a political act.

It is thus about questioning the meaning of the political outside what we once considered as classical ways of doing politics today, as formally institutionalized and conventional practices (e.g., protests, elections, political parties and groups, trade unions, information via television and the press). As these findings also apply to the category "youth," it allows us to "move beyond the commonly used dichotomy of 'engaged/non-engaged'" towards further research on youth political (non-)engagement (Mahéo et al. 2012: 407, 422). Other authors have emphasized a more nuanced view of youth "non-participation" than interpreting it as "political apathy" (O'Toole et al. 2003; Henn et al. 2007; Garvay 2012). Considering hip hop as particularly (but not exclusively) youth friendly, I follow Anne Muxel (2010: 60) in her consideration of young people's political commitment:

> The political commitment of young people is constructed and shaped by a double dynamic, that of legacy and that of experimentation. It is part of the negotiation that every new generation must make, on the one hand, with the political culture it inherits and, on the other hand, with the conditions of experience specific to the historical and political context in which it takes place.

Now that the concept of politics has been theoretically reviewed and the matter of political engagement with artistic practices has been delimited, I can begin to relate it with popular arts and cultures in Francophone Belgium. Indeed, as shown above with the example of hip hop, popular arts and culture seem quite unavoidable when talking of artistic and cultural practices represented in post-migration cities and appear relevant as multiple forms of expressions of ethnicized communities and their descendants in Western countries. Regarding the relatively neglected research area of the arts in immigrant incorporation and diversity in migration and post-migration cities, Martiniello (2015: 1231) identifies five areas (cultural, social, around the representation of "cultural diversity," political, and economic) where the links between immigration, ethnicity, "race," and artistic practices can be analyzed. Taken together, these

levels provide a general framework within which theoretically grounded empirical research can be undertaken.

The political strand of this framework is obviously the first in which my research could develop. As potential vectors of collective identities formation in multicultural societies, the arts "can play an important role in *social and political mobilization*."[26] Therefore, studying "how artistic expressions today protest against and denunciate the local social and political order and also how they express support for the established local order and its mystified values," as well as how some artists can act as and/or support politicians (Martiniello 2015b: 1233), could be interesting for the research area around politics and popular arts and culture. This also seems to confirm that the political dimension of popular artistic practices such as hip hop can incorporate the three sub-areas of the concept of politics identified above: "Like reggae, rap asserts the 'right of expression of categories of populations usually excluded from public forums and political arenas'" (Clément 2015: 124).

On the sub-area of policies, one should first say that, in the European context, "the state intervenes in culture and arts through complex patterns of cultural and artistic policies." Public policy analysis could then give attention to the matter of the "representation of diversity" in post-migration societies at various scales and questions such as "[d]o official cultural institutions support immigrant artists?" or "[a]re local cultural policies becoming multicultural?" may arise (Martiniello 2015b: 1232). Cultural policies are not the only policies in which arts and culture could be mobilized through various means and for diverse purposes; incorporation, social cohesion, health, and urban or local touristic policies can also use it (Dufournet et al. 2008: 4).[27]

These developments allow for a more nuanced examination of the political dimensions of hip hop in Francophone Belgium, putting it into a context for thinking about the relationship between politics and popular cultural and artistic practices. Nevertheless, to keep laying the groundwork for analyzing the political scope of popular arts and culture, we must first identify

[26] Highlighted by Martiniello, the quoted author.

[27] In this regard, for example, the recent evaluation of the public policy of the "integration pathway" and the "socio-professional integration device" dedicated to newcomers in Wallonia observes that "social and cultural capital are elements that strongly contribute to the inclusion of newcomers, although they are insufficiently taken into account" in the evaluated policy. Indeed, it does not sufficiently recognize and support associative networks that mobilize social and cultural capital of newcomers (Gossiaux et al. 2019: 104–105).

what is concretely "political" in a given temporal and material configuration. Returning to the statement that opened this section: rap music is political. By analyzing interviews with French rap music artists by journalists in 1991 and 2010, Hammou (2010: n.p.) asks: "Is there a deep misunderstanding about what 'political' means? What does it mean to refer to something or someone as 'political', from the commentator's point of view, and what does it mean to be called 'political', from the rapper's point of view?" In *Une histoire du rap en France*, Hammou (2014: 80) explains that starting from the 1990s French rap music became "symptoms of public problems" in the mainstream media and public discourse: "To speak of rap is to expose the 'things of the Others' and to adopt a form of 'anthropological exoticism' consisting of describing a practice in homogenizing and stereotyped terms, while firmly establishing it in its supposed foreignness." This "systematically politicized interpretation of rap by the media" would then reduce "political rap to the level of inoffensive popular entertainment." This logic would reflect a normality bias in which the object of popular culture is systematically approached in terms of legitimate culture (Clément 2015: 127–128). However, one feature of rap in contemporary music lies in its propensity to deconstruct the images associated with it, its production sites, and its main participants. In this way, while "folklorizing 'street culture' can be read as showmanship of subversion […] to see it as a non-political statement is an error of judgement... or a deliberate act aimed at discrediting the statement before analyzing it" (Jésu 2018: 53). This dynamic of folklorization of rap music is further explored using the notion of postcolonial exoticism, helping us to avoid a "Manichean reading" and allowing us to identify politics in "the glorification of personal success in the purest canons of triumphant capitalism" (Carrel et al. 2018: 7).

Section 2

Understanding the initial political dimension of the globalized "hip hop nation": Intercultural circulations and the postcolonial African American experience within the Gilroy's "Black Atlantic"

Having presented the analytical framework regarding the main elements of the "political" concept, we can now try to better locate the potential politics of hip hop through an overview of its emergence in New York and Los Angeles. The aim here is not to determine or define what "hip hop" is or is not, or what it should or should not be, but rather to limit my object of study while developing an analytical tool suited to my research field and theoretical approach.

Subsection 1: "The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody" or the common politics of engaged and commercial rap music?

The emergence of hip hop can be explored through the careers of three of its founding figures: DJ Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, along with the organization Universal Zulu Nation (UZN),[28] and Grandmaster Flash. While not providing an exhaustive overview of the emergence of hip hop, these careers affirm that it grew out of the political, social, economic, and cultural experiences of some underprivileged and ghettoized communities, especially African American ones, in the US. On New York, Neal (2004: 366) highlights that "the Black Public Sphere of the postindustrial city represented a de facto state or racial segregation that was, arguably, much more insidious than segregated black spaces prior to the Civil Rights Movement." This situation would have contributed to the emergence of "a distinct urban-based African-American youth culture" in the middle to late 1970s (ibid.).

While the legacy of Afrika Bambaataa and the UZN is severely damaged by recent disclosures and a lawsuit around childhood sexual abuse and trafficking of minors,[29] they would be at the root of the ideological and philosophical foundation of hip hop culture through the unification of some core elements based on a kind of values and practices system. This system and its "rich, complex, and interwoven set of expressions that gang-leader-turned-social-organizer Afrika Bambaataa termed *hip-hop*"[30] (Petchauer 2009: 946) seems "theorized as a possible way out of social problems" and as an attempt to "sublimate the violence" of gangs (Lafargue de Grangeneuve 2008: 11), to divert this force into a "constructive and expressive agitation" in order to get this ghettoized and alienated youth out of the self-destruction logic into which it was sinking (Lapiower 1997: 264). I believe "[t]his distancing paves the way for [the] implementation [of hip hop culture] into policies", as the French situation highlights (Lafargue de Grangeneuve 2008: 11).

[28] The first institution dedicated to the organization of hip hop cultural events and the promotion of hip hop culture through various social initiatives and actions.

[29] In 2021, a John Doe civil suit was filed against Lance Taylor and the Universal Zulu Nation in New York (Bronx) for childhood sexual abuse and sex trafficking on a 12-year-old boy from 1991 to 1995. Taylor first denied the allegations on the advice of legal counsel, and "the Zulu Nation, who at first supported him, has now distanced itself from its founder" (Whitaker 2021: 32). Indeed, Taylor was first accused of sexual abuse of minors in 2016 by four men (Gee 2023). UZN subsequently issued an open letter of apology to the victims (see UZN (2016): "Universal Zulu Nation open letter to survivors, members, and our communities").

[30] Highlighted by Petchauer, the quoted author.

Analysis in urban sociology highlights how post-industrial cities and inner-city ghettos "provided the context for creative development among hip hop's earliest innovators" and "shaped their cultural terrain, access to space, materials, and education" (Rose 1994: 21, 34). Therefore, "hip-hop was undeniably affiliated with street culture and those who were most strongly identified with an urban existence […] The emphasis on the streets as a unique and formative cultural space endures in hip-hop to this day" (Forman 2010: 4). This cultural space is not, however, homogenous. Distinctions within hip hop culture emerged early "between different discursive and ideological orientations that are directed toward vastly different socio-cultural perspectives and practices" (ibid.). The emergence of so-called "Gangsta Rap" in the 1980s on the US West Coast is a good example.

One way to schematize these distinctions can be found in the underscoring of kinds of "tensions" between the "classic art versus commerce relationship" (Forman 2010: 4). The most explicit manifestation of the crystallization of these tensions can be found in a comparison of two of the first major rap hits: "Rapper's Delight" (1979) and "The Message" (1982). It would appear that "[f]rom the outset, rap was defined doubly, by the succession [...] of the first two hits: 'Rapper's Delight' [...], then 'The Message' [...]; the free pleasure of rhyme and rhythm, then the denunciation of living conditions in neglected neighbourhoods" (Pecqueux 2009: 92, 9, 10).

"Rapper's Delight" by the hip hop trio Sugarhill Gang was released in July 1979 when New York label owners and producers were seeking to find out if the new MCing/rapping phenomenon, popularized notably by Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five, was financially viable. Sylvia Robinson, former singer and co-owner of the New Jersey label Sugar Hill Records, brought together three musicians, who had never met before, to form the Sugarhill Gang, whose success confirmed the economic potential of rap and hip hop. In other words, "'Rapper's Delight' turned hip-hop into popular music"; it "crossed over New York's insular hip-hop scene to Black radio, then charged up the American Top 40, and swept around the globe. Imitations popped up from Brazil to Jamaica. It became the best-selling twelve-inch single ever pressed [at the time]" (Chang 2005: 131). Tom Silverman, DJ and music journalist founder of the Tommy Boy label,[31] "had never seen anything like it." Just before Christmas

[31] Independent record label founded in 1981, which edited a lot of anthology songs and albums, such as *Planet Rock* by Afrika Bambaataa & The Soulsonic Force (1982), *3 Feet High and Rising*, the first album by the group De La Soul with the famous song "Me, Myself and I" (1989), *All Hail the Queen*, the first album by the rapper

1979, he recalls seeing trucks delivering the single to shops on Fulton Street in Brooklyn: "They must've moved two million records in a month on twelve-inch vinyl just in New York. I said, 'I gotta be in this business, this is great!" (Chang 2005: 132; Fernando Jr 2000: 42). The song's lyrics contributed significantly to popularize the term "hip hop", starting with the famous chorus: "*I said a hip, hop, the hippie, the hippie/ To the hip, hip hop and you don't stop the rockin'/ To the bang-bang boogie, say up jump the boogie/ To the rhythm of the boogie, the beat*" (Fernando Jr 2000: 43).

The members of The Sugarhill Gang were not in fact rappers, but "rap amateurs" being "a studio creation" (Chang 2005: 132). Grandmaster Caz, DJ, MC, and pioneer hip hop artist (Edgers 2016), is the writer of most of the "Rapper's Delight" lyrics.[32] His opinion about The Sugarhill Gang is candid: "It didn't represent what an MC was, or rap, or hip hop. It didn't show what it actually was, but for the general public and on a national scale, it was everyone's first impression of what hip hop was" (Fernando Jr 2000: 43). Anyway, the song "was tailor-made to travel, to be perfectly accessible to folks who had never heard of rap or hip-hop or The Bronx." The phenomenal success of "Rapper's Delight" was a revelation for the first hip hop activists because none of them had imagined that it could sell and spread beyond New York. This first success led to a wave of anthology singles produced by labels that would help certify the existence of hip hop as a musical genre: "The inexplicable success of the Sugarhill Gang transformed the scene overnight. Artists and labels scrambled to cash in" (Chang 2005: 132).

In short, "'Rapper's Delight' changed everything; most importantly, it solidified rap's commercial status" (Rose 1994: 56). Nevertheless, as the French rapper Akhenaton highlights, "[w]e hadn't yet reached the stage of social, political and protest rap, a trend that was only to appear with The Message, and its clip shot in the Bronx – the third world at the time." With The Sugarhill Gang, "the message was more basic, but essential: fun, dance, positivity. Peace, Unity, Love and Havin' Fun was the credo of the [UZN]" (2010: 62). In 1982, Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five released "The Message," the first nationally and internationally successful rap song denouncing the living conditions in the US ghettos. Again, this song

Queen Latifah (1989) and *19 Naughty III*, the third album by the group Naught by Nature with the famous song "Hip Hop Hooray" (1993).

[32] It is now common knowledge that the verse by Big Bank Hank was plagiarized from some of Grandmaster Caz's rhymes while the latter was never credited. In 2000, Caz decided to tell the true story by releasing the song "MC Delight (Casanova's Revenge)": "He made a deal with The Sugarhill Gang to rap/ And weeks later gave me a call/ He said: 'I need some rhymes to rock off 'Good Times''/ I said, Why? You ain't no emcee."

changed hip hop forever. The same label, Sugar Hill Records, produced both songs, giving to Sylvia Robinson her nickname "Mother of Hip Hop" (which could also describe Cindy Campbell). "The Message" promoted rap on the road to a new thematic register towards social realism and commentary through a kind of warning message from some ghetto chroniclers to describe "the despair of the urban condition" (Fernando Jr 2000: 52; Henderson 1996: 311).

Regarding copyrights and related royalties, Grandmaster Flash said in 1997: "I hated the fact that it was advertised as Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five, because the only people on the record [from the group] were Mel and Duke Bootee" (*Rolling Stone* 2003). Indeed, the main writers of the song were Duke Bootee, Melle Mel, and the producer/composer Jiggs Chase, following an idea from Sylvia Robinson, who "wanted a serious song to show what was happening in society, but hadn't been able to get it together" (Chase, cited in Sullivan 2013). Once the song was mixed, Robinson brought it to the main radio DJ in New York: "Eleven days later, it went gold. *Rolling Stone* named it the No 1 hip-hop record of all time. I've always thought: 'Shit, if I'd known what it was going to do, I'd have kept it for myself'" (Duke Bootee, cited in Sullivan 2013). These explanations lead David Diallo (2018: 77) to underline that "although it continues to be presented as the founding act of rap's urban authenticity and political breath, this record is in fact the product of a system reminiscent of a hit factory frequently employed by the record industry," which does not detract from its symbolic significance.

Contrary to the hedonistic and "naïve" song "Rapper's Delight," the foundation of the "party rap movement," "The Message", instigator of the "socially-conscious rap movement" (Engels 2014: 66), offers a realistic alternative. From now on, hip hop would no longer focus solely on festive urgency but would keep a daily diary of life in the ghettos (Bertot 2012: 19, 20; Lena 2006: 487). "The Message" became "the music of the world's oppressed" (Bourhis and Brüno 2016: 92). Indeed, "it was the grimmest, most downbeat rap ever heard. And that vibe matched a rising disgust with Reaganomics, the culmination of fifteen years of benign neglect [policy], and a sense of hopelessness that only seemed to be deepening" (Chang 2005: 179). Three years after "Rapper's Delight", "The Message" confirmed an important trend at this time, rap music's takeover of the entire image externally associated with hip hop culture: "The power of rappers' voices and their role as storytellers ensured that rapping would become the central expression in hip hop culture" (Rose 1994: 55). To some extent, "hip hop" and "rap" are synonyms because

after its massive and international success, rap music, originally a component of hip hop culture, came to refer to the latter as a whole.

The socially conscious rap movement, "message rap," "conscious hip-hop" (Forman 2010: 5), or "socially and politically conscious (SPC) Hip Hop" (Alridge 2005: 226), appears thus as "rap that is socially aware and consciously connected to historic patterns of political protest and aligned with progressive forces of social critique" (Dyson, in Forman 2010: 5). Indeed, from the earliest days of hip hop, socially conscious hip hop has "continued to espouse many of the ideas and ideology of the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) and Black Freedom Struggle (BFS), but in a language that resonates with many black youth of the postindustrial and post-civil rights integrationist era" (Alridge, 2005: 226). While the generation gap between hip hop activists and members of organizations involved with the African American freedom struggle partly explains certain tensions and criticisms on both sides, these movements have been able to embrace the same ideas and share common themes and discourses. Socially conscious hip hop mobilizes the ideas and ideologies of CRM and BSF in order to "offer cogent analyses and commentary on race, poverty, and discrimination" (Alridge 2005: 227). The hit "Fight the Power" (1989) by the rap band Public Enemy, could be considered as a kind of idealistic socially conscious hip hop song. More recently, Kendrick Lamar's "HiiiPower" (2011), "Fuck Your Ethnicity" (2011), "The Blacker the Berry" (2015), and "DNA" (2017) were built on the same sociopolitical heritage and cultural symbolism and represent good examples of conscious rap that has achieved global commercial success from a leading figure of hip hop.

A kind of political collective consciousness of socially conscious hip hop appears thus quite explicit in its discourses and, generally, in social practices affiliated to it. What about the categorization "party rap movement"? This genre, which can be categorized more broadly—and still mirror socially conscious hip hop—as "commercial hip hop" (such as "Rappers' Delight"), really exploded during the mid- to late 1980s with the emergence and popularization of gangsta rap in Los Angeles. It should be noted that the history of hip hop's emergence on the East and West coasts of the US is not necessarily the same, as if hip hop were somehow born twice, once in New York and once in Los Angeles (Baker 2018; Evil 2018). Indeed, while Afrika Bambaataa and the UZN succeeded to some extent in freeing certain young people in the New York ghettos from the grip of gangs, the "galvanizing utopia" proposed by the UZN chapters in New York did not make its way to Los Angeles (Baker 2018: 89). Gangs in Los

Angeles therefore continued to be the main vehicle for the socialization of young people in the ghettos.

It seems that "[s]cholars agree that other rap forms [than gangsta rap] reflect a generic concern for chronicling the 'black' experience." In this framework for chronicling African American experiences, it would appear that "gangsta rap is specifically interested in the black underclass in the ghetto." Indeed, one of the central features of gangsta rap in relation to other artistic practices in hip hop culture would be the exacerbation of a "ghettocentricity" posture (Kubrin 2005: 361). Through its ghettocentricity, the original gangsta rap artistic approach would distinguish itself by providing a direct testimony of the real living conditions and the state of consciousness of African American populations constituting the "lumpenproletariat" of the American ghettos. The advent of gangsta rap may be viewed, in part, as a reaction by this lumpenproletariat to extreme disadvantage and to a set of structural dynamics that contribute to a system of oppression (Kubrin 2005: 361; Moore 2007: 8).

These few thoughts about gangsta rap lead us to very briefly refer to the most famous organization of the era of revolutionary Black Power in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Black Panther Party, originally the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP). As Cleaver (in Van Wersel 2006: 38) stated: "[t]he decisive book, the one that set the Party in motion, is *The Wretched of the Earth* [*Les damnés de la terre*, Fanon 1961 (1963 for English publication)]. It was after reading this book that Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton got the trigger." The dismantling of the legality of racial segregation following *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) and the enactment of anti-segregation legislation from 1955 to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 did nothing to address the socio-economic problems of most African American communities (Van Eersel 2006). This moderate success by the CRM, coupled with the darkening social climate, spread the seeds for a major shift in African American politics and in "black nationalist thinking"[33] during the post-World War II era (Robinson 2001: 51). In this context, the popularization of certain conceptualizations developed by thinkers like Frantz Fanon or Malcolm X seems to have made a decisive contribution to structuring the renewal

[33] Following Wilson J. Moses (*Classical Black Nationalism*, 1996) and William L. Van Deburg (*Modern Black Nationalism*, 1997), black American nationalism can be categorized into three main periods: "protonationalism" (end of 18th century to 1850 approximately), the "classical" period (1850–1920), and "modern nationalism, formed in the crucible of the civil rights movement, African independence, and Black Power radicalism […] detached from a physical relationship with Africa, leaving in the background the demand for the creation of a sovereign State" (Chivallon 2006, 49; Robinson 2001: 1–7).

dynamic of modern black nationalism in the 1960s. More specifically, the "domestic colony" or "internal colonialism" model (Fanon 1961) convinced some activists to consider their struggle as a decolonization struggle within the global framework of an anti-colonialist struggle. Abandoning the non-violent approach, many black activists adopted the same model, claiming that violent revolutionary resistance could be required (Robinson 2001: 81–83; Van Eersel 2006: 38; Vergès 2005: 48, 49).

By considering themselves part of a people who were victims of internal colonialism that the instigators of Black Power defined the values and structured the principles of their movement: "It is also a fact that what must be destroyed is not the black community, but the relations of colonial dependence that were imposed on it" (Carmichael and Hamilton 2009 [1967]: 95). In line with Fanon's analyses, the organizations claiming to be part of the Black Power movement were able to affirm that the passage through violence and "a true national liberation struggle" could lead to real and significant political changes for these African American populations colonized from the inside. Consequently, the ideological infrastructure of the BPP and Black Power owes much to Fanon's conceptualizations and his analysis of the situation and state of consciousness of colonized peoples around the world, as well as to Malcolm X and other thinkers and activists (Van Deburg 1997: 127; Van Eersel 2006: 39). The gangs in Los Angeles had already been taken over by organizations such as the BPP before hip hop culture spread. This recuperation "was made all the easier by the fact that many of their leaders [...] were themselves former thugs and celebrated at length the union of revolution and lumpen, of which street gangs were a fairly good representation" (Evil 2018: 234).

One of the pioneers and icons of gangsta rap is the rapper Ice T (well known today for his role in the TV show *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*). Born in New Jersey in 1958, he moved to Los Angeles (Compton) in the 1970s after the death of his parents. As a teenager, he joined the Hoover Crips, a "franchise" of the Crips[34] gang formed in his high school, Crenshaw High School. As he explains, "[w]e didn't live in the hip-hop culture, hip-hop was born in New York. They had the graffiti artists, the breakdancers, we had none of that, we had the gangs" (Evil 2018: 99). After becoming a father at 17, Ice T looked for a more secure situation than gangbanging and joined the army for four years. He then discovered "Rapper's Delight." Back

[34] The Crips are considered one of the most important gangs to emerge in the early 1970s in Los Angeles. Their main rivals are the Bloods, a gang that was formed at the same period because of internal dissension within the Crips and their alliances with other gangs (Evil 2018: 93).

in Compton and having returned to associating with his fellow Crips, he participated in the reception of hip hop culture on the West Coast and embodied the nascent California rap (Evil 2018: 97–98). Indeed, from the mid-1980s, rap began spreading from East Coast to West Coast and

> first pierced the consciousness of most of the country. Some of the best-known and most-respected artists in rap's history emerged in these years, from Run-DMC to Eric B. & Rakim, Public Enemy to De La Soul, Ice-T to N.W.A. This period ends with the emergence of what was popularly termed 'gangsta rap', which sparked the first national controversies about rap's explicit content (Bradley and Dubois 2010: 42).

One of the foundational tracks in gangsta rap is one of Ice T's first official songs, "6 'N The Mornin'," released in 1986 and featured on his first album, *Rhyme Pays* (1987). Ice T describes this song as a "faction" (combining "fact" and "fiction"): "They're factual situations put into a fictional story" (Baker 2018: 14): "*6 in the mornin', police at my door/ Fresh Adidas squeak across the bathroom floor/ Out my back window I make my escape/ Didn't even get a chance to grab my old school tape/ Mad with no music, but happy 'cause free/ And the streets to a player is the place to be*." This song affirms that the introduction of lyrical content directly inspired by famous "toasts" from black American oral literature is Ice T's great contribution to rap and thus to the emergence of gangsta rap. Ice T's distinctive style, which drew upon his personal experiences as a teenager, established a unique connection between rap music and folklore related to African American literature in the US.

As I explain in more detail in a collective book chapter devoted to Frantz Fanon's thinking in the arts and literature of the Americas (Gossiaux 2022), diverse African folkloric practices could provide a "cultural platform" for enslaved people to preserve their self-determined humanity during slavery. Among these narrative traditions are those relating to the tales and stories of "tricksters," cunning characters, pranksters, and swindlers whose tales embodied "slaves' ability to navigate between the masters' world view and their own" (Nyawalo 2013: 464). After abolition, with the rise of segregation and blues music, the "badman" figure replaced the trickster: "The figure of the badman as an outlaw or a 'gangsta', as he later appeared in hip-hop culture, stems from these historical and cultural forces" (ibid.: 465). The badman/gangsta "meta-juridical figure" (ibid.: 466) symbolizes thus a defiance of oppressive legal and social structures and bears witness to the visions in which African Americans could perceive themselves as they had been projected in the realities of segregation. It is about reconstructing

these perceptions to (re)appropriate it through the narratives of figures considered as heroic outside of the oppressive legal structures and sociopolitical practices in question. These narrative practices of "bad guys" and "gangsters" evolved in the 1960s into "toasting" as a performative gesture form in which the artist embodies the outlaw through aesthetic codes. This practice significantly influenced the development of rap music, notably with Ice T's contribution.[35]

The development of the initial artistic approach of gangsta rap can be further detailed by going back to one of its most famous songs, the hit "Fuck tha Police" by the group N.W.A (Niggaz Wit Attitudes). Indeed, "[w]ith their *Straight Outta Compton* disc (1988), an underground album that sold over 2 million copies, N.W.A laid the groundwork for gangsta rap" (Fernando Jr 2000: 139). The album includes "Fuck tha Police," written by the rapper Ice Cube, the group's lyricist, and produced by Dr. Dre, who might today still be the most emblematic gangsta rap artist. The song depicts a one-sided trial between N.W.A and Los Angeles law enforcement in which band members take on the roles of judge and prosecutors. Ice Cube's "prosecution's summing up" appears as a testament to the rebellion "against the world and Amerikkkain [sic] oppression in the first place" (Evil 2018: 180).

[Intro]

[The D.O.C.] *Right about now, N.W.A court is in full effect/ Judge Dre presiding*
In the case of N.W.A. versus the Police Department/ Prosecuting attorneys are MC Ren, Ice Cube
And Eazy-motherfucking-E
[Dr. Dre] […] *Well, won't you tell everybody what the fuck you gotta say?*

[Verse 1: Ice Cube]

Fuck the police! Comin' straight from the underground/ A young nigga got it bad 'cause I'm brown
And not the other color so police think/ They have the authority to kill a minority […]
Searchin' my car, lookin' for the product/ Thinkin' every nigga is sellin' narcotics
You'd rather see me in the pen [i.e., penitentiary]/ *Than me and Lorenzo* [i.e., MC Ren] *rollin' in a Benz-o* [i.e., Mercedes-Benz (global automobile brand)]
[…] *Just 'cause I'm from the CPT* [i.e., the city of Compton]/ *Punk police are afraid of me*
Huh, a young nigga on the warpath/ And when I'm finished, it's gonna be a bloodbath

[35] In 2025, the beverage brand Lipton Ice Tea Benelux launched a new marketing campaign featuring the rapper Ice T. The campaign capitalizes on Ice T's status as an "original gangster (OG)" to advertise Lipton Ice Tea as the real "original" iced tea.

Of cops, dying in L.A./ Yo, Dre, I got something to say

[Chorus: Dr. Dre (scratching)]
[Scratches] *"Fuck tha police!"* [X4]

Beyond the artistic violence of the lyrics and the posture claimed, the strength of "Fuck tha Police" lies in its capacity to restore the despair of daily life in ghettos to finally explain why it comes to plead for war against the police within an aesthetic framework:

> In a few words, he manages to make his listeners feel the helpless rage of the young black man who is being controlled for the umpteenth time by the police, who, on the sole basis of his age, the colour of his skin and the way he is dressed, see in him nothing but a potential drug dealer, a despicable suspect who is only too ready to be humiliated by a useless body search and, if necessary, a short stay at the station to teach him about life (Evil 2018: 234).

During the writing of his first solo album (*Amrikkka's Most Wanted*, 1990), Ice Cube took this specific figure of the gangsta that he had constructed in "Fuck tha Police" "to transform it into a furious representation of the revolt of all black youth, criminal or not." He then placed himself at the head of this revolt,

> ready to unleash on white Amerikkka [sic] this spectre that it has been trying to conjure up since the cursed times of slavery, what Dr. Dre will call on *The Chronic* [1992], referring to the South Central riots in April/May 1992, 'The Day the Niggaz Took Over' (Evil 2018: 253).

One cannot discuss the history of politics in hip hop without mentioning the rapper 2Pac. If Afrika Bambaataa framed hip hop's philosophy, 2Pac, or Makaveli (referring to Niccolò Machiavelli), embodied it fully: "Tupac Shakur's words and life embody the pinnacle of hip-hop's philosophical development. This development continues to this day, but [2Pac] is at the heart of hip-hop philosophy because he lives what he raps, and he raps what he lives, like no one else" (McEwen 2019: 197). Son of Afeni Shakur, a Panther 21 member, 2Pac, co-produced by Dr. Dre, remains one of the most famous figures in both gangsta and engaged rap. Indeed, in order to create a desire for political engagement and generate activism among young people in ghettos and disadvantaged neighborhoods, he developed and lived the "thug life": "Thug life philosophy was shaped by Tupac's experiences of living in a dysfunctional home, with a drug addicted mother and no support from father. These experiences led Tupac to seek refuge in the

'streets'." Just like the BPP, which sought to rally the disorganized masses of the lumpenproletariat because it believed in its revolutionary potential, "Tupac also believed that 'thugs' could be transformed and made ready for political activism." To popularize an acronym for "thug life," 2Pac defined its real meaning: "'The Hate U Gave Little Infants Fucks Everybody' was a symbolic expression of the difficult experiences that children growing up in the ghetto confronted" (Stanford 2011: 16). When asked about the origin of the term, 2Pac (cited in Wells-Wilbon et al. 2010: 523) stated: "I didn't create Thug Life, I diagnosed it." As if being both warrior and educator, he was using "his voice to challenge European domination over the thinking and socialization of people of African ancestry" (Wells-Wilbon et al. 2010: 510).

Relating these developments with contemporary rap music, we can view in Kendrick Lamar a credible successor to this approach.[36] He was proclaimed the reigning king of West Coast rap by Snoop Dogg himself, a title he accepted during a concert with Dr. Dre in 2011, where the torch was ceremoniously passed to him. Recently, Snoop Dogg (cited in Bustard 2022: n.p.) expressed interesting thoughts about the globalization of (West Coast) rap music:

> I get a chance to stand back and watch the youngsters do what they do. I mean, I did my thing with it for 20-something years as far as being the king of the West Coast, gave the crown to Kendrick Lamar – I didn't give it to him; actually, he took it, but I had to take it off my head and give it to him. And he's been running wild with it and the music that's been coming out from the West has been very, very good. It's international, it's not just regional, it's not local no more; it's global. So when I go across the world and I hear music from the West Coast, that makes me feel good to know that it's constantly growing and it's constantly being effective.

Subsection 2: Postcoloniality in hip hop: Glocalizing the "blackness" label through commercial and cultural (mis)appropriation

The main thread of the research so far can be stated thus: the "deterritorialization of rap culture, originally anchored in the American context, creates new and unprecedented ways of staging the experience of minority populations, which does not exempt it from the reproduction of stereotypes (or even the creation of new ones)," without forgetting that "[t]he marginal character of everything that is popular and peripheral does not protect against re-appropriation

[36] Throughout his artistic career, Kendrick Lamar has often acknowledged the great influence that 2Pac could have had on him. A recent example lies with "Reincarnated," from his surprise album *GNX* released at the end of 2024, where he uses the same sample than 2Pac in the song "Made Niggaz" (featuring The Outlawz) (1996), while rapping certain passages in a manner redolent of 2Pac.

and commodification" (Bouyahia 2011: 6, 8). This may explain why hip hop everywhere carries a kind of political consciousness relying on a shared symbolic imaginary, a specific history, translated in local settings. In this part of the work, I shed light on mechanisms that explain the transmission and appropriation of such a symbolic consciousness outside of the US.

In the literature review, I introduced the concept of "Black Atlantic" developed by Gilroy in 1993. The Black Atlantic could be understood as a space of transnational cultural construction carrying dynamics and processes of cultural identifications resulting from mechanisms that can be found in "movement, interconnection [and] mixed references" akin to the sociality of African American diaspora populations "who would provide a paradigmatic example" (Chivallon 2002: 51–52) to the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 2010 [1993]). Mobilizing this model could help to deepen the analysis of the cultural foundations of hip hop from the perspective of its reception and appropriation around the world. Indeed, just like the Black Atlantic, it seems that hip hop culture is built on "an explicitly intercultural and transnational perspective," which would help explain why this "powerful expressive medium of expression of America's urban black poor […] has created a global youth movement of considerable significance" (Gilroy 2010: 34, 59).

The central idea around which the Black Atlantic model is built is that the African diaspora is said to be a dynamic cultural power whose rooting in the development of Western capitalism has transformed it into a major source of influence for world popular culture (Bennett 1999: 4). The highlighting of the "principle of connection according to which no cultural register developed by the black diaspora is pure; all are inspired by the various sources stemming from the particular contact between the African and European worlds" allows us to grasp Gilroy's central idea by recalling that "[t]he transatlantic slave trade and slavery form the foundation of this experience" (Chivallon 2002: 54). He underlines "[t]he power and significance of music within the Black Atlantic" in which "music comprises a central even foundational element" (Gilroy 2010: 113, 114) when analyzing the social relations articulated around the processes of (re)production of cultural expressions. As explained by Soumahoro (2020: 41), it is about highlighting transatlantic journeys and trajectories within the "Atlantic space" from the beginning of modern age that were foundational, as well as being a "vector for unprecedented links between three continents: Europe, Africa and the Americas." The intercultural circulations at work in this triangulation appear as theoretical and analytical tools to which several concepts can be linked, including that of the "African diaspora."

Speaking about the UK, Gilroy (2010: 125–126) notes: "Dislocated from their original conditions of existence, the soundtracks of this African-American cultural broadcast fed a new metaphysics of blackness elaborated and enacted in Europe and elsewhere within the underground, alternative, public spaces constituted around an expressive culture that was dominated by music." Soumahoro (2020: 104) highlights that "French rap, as an artistic proposition with its own innovative aesthetic, is one of those spaces in postcolonial France where questions of immigration, identity, double culture, race and the idea of one or more '*chez soi*' [i.e., at home] have been unequivocally evoked." The author explains that before the end of the 1990s and the solidification of French rap music, "there had been no words, no discourse, no space between my parents and France to describe this experience that was nonetheless mine: black and French" (ibid.: 85). Still referring to the French context, in the film *La Haine* [*Hate*] (see below), the main protagonist "seeks to fabricate an origin or a sense of presence for himself by borrowing from the oppressed history of African American" learned through hip hop, while being "unable to connect with the society of his present" (Doughty and Griffiths 2006: 126). The inherently global nature of hip hop indicates that its potential collective political consciousness transcends the conventional constraints associated with traditional forms of political engagement in representative democracies. In this way, hip hop appears as a product of postmaterialism when individualizing political practices and actions in a context of structural discriminations and postcolonial experience where some groups have no access to "official" or "formal" political life and processes.

In Rose's (1994: 34) words: "Hip-hop culture emerged as a source for youth of alternative identity formation and social status in a community whose older local support institution had been all but demolished along with large sectors of its built environment." On the other hand, studies have shown that the global commercialization and massive industrialization of hip hop culture can be explained in part by the flexibility of its artistic practices and their capacity, particularly in rap performance, to construct a specific form of denunciation that sets itself up as an artistic expression of narrated and imagined resistance (Kitwana 2002; LeBlanc et al. 2007; Charnas 2010; Hammou 2014; Miller et al. 2014).

It appears that "[t]he ability of rap music and performance to externalize and denounce the social frustration and urban malaise of African-Americans" (Djerrahian 2010: 22) promoted hip hop internationally and greatly promoted its reception and global appropriation. Indeed, minority groups evolving "in contexts far removed from the reality of the United States, have

taken an interest in black American history and struggles in order to take control of their own living conditions" (ibid.). This dynamic of "appropriation of blackness" by "groups geographically and culturally distant from the African diasporas from which it emanates" would then allow for the introduction in multiple and diverse societal and social configurations of "a highly symbolic performative and discursive dimension, adapted according to the national, ethnic and racial markers of the places where hip-hop has been exported" and newly acquired in this process (ibid.). As overviewed above, some studies have concluded that hip hop, in addition of being a phenomenon of resistance to the dominant culture, could provide a space, a set of "third spaces" (see below), parallel networks, in which individuals can invest to gain forms of legitimacy other than those of the national space, which would be inaccessible to them in whole or in part: "this space is a communication network, a field of artistic expression, a place to live, which insinuates itself into the gaps in the system and creates useful gateways to break into the cultural field" (Lapiower 1997: 275; de Villers 2005: 25; LeBlanc et al. 2007; Mbaye 2010).

These developments allow us to understand why Morgan and Bennett (2011: 179), when analyzing the "perspectives of many followers of hip-hop," consider it "the lingua franca for popular and political youth culture around the world." They analyze "hip-hop's role as a global imprint that symbolizes unity, justice, and equality through its interpretation of black cultural and political practices and values" (ibid.). The works of Morgan and Bennett are very helpful when thinking about the global aspect of hip hop as well as its multiple and diverse local appropriations. They refer to the works of other scholars studying European hip hop through sociolinguistics to explain the concept of "glocalization." This involves "a recontextualization of cultural forms through 'local' appropriations of a globally acceptable cultural model 'that are integrated into a new social context'." Actually, as "[c]omplex transculturation shape global hip-hop," the concept of glocalization highlights a "process of continuous cultural exchange" allowing us to move forward in the analysis rather than relying on the "unidirectional model of cultural transmission implied by the concepts of acculturation, appropriation, or cultural imperialism" (ibid.: 181), while recognizing that some values underpinning rap music come from "products of broader American culture" (Kubrin 2005: 376).

While the influence of representations of the collective political consciousness of hip hop seem embodied in global hip hop as a whole, as the examples of PE or the UZN demonstrate, gangsta or mainstream rap are much more discussed as other aspects of African American cultural

representations and postcolonial experiences. Indeed, thinking of the social justice struggle of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, we can note that "American forms of racism are so widely known and studied as an example of injustice that individuals all over the world know both the explicit signs and the smoldering, everyday existence of repression. Yet there is extensive commentary and critique of the representation of U.S.-style violence in hip-hop" (Morgan and Bennett 2011: 189). It is therefore useful to understand these more polemical representations within the specific context of the US before analyzing their reception and discussion in other contexts.

A glocalization process of the cultural and aesthetic features of hip hop, translated in forms of appropriation of "blackness," is at the basis of the transmission of a kind of political consciousness embodied in hip hop due to its American and transatlantic routes and roots. This dynamic would explain what I call the "initial political dimension" of hip hop in the framing of my research hypothesis below. This approach helps us to understand politics outside of formal, institutionalized, or conventional politics, relating both to the issues of what is "political or not" and "political engagement" nowadays through qualitative analysis of popular artistic practices, questioning racism in modern global capitalist societies. Before turning (in the next chapter) more specifically to contemporary racism and the racialized framework into which hip hop culture and rap music evolve, it is useful to outline a few points about the commodification of a postcolonial culture like hip hop and its best-known artistic practice, rap music.

The central element of the analytical approach developed so far is to be found in the idea of the globalization of the postcolonial African American experience of double consciousness implying a commodification of the hip hop postcolonial culture resulting from it. According to Lipsitz (1994: 27) when speaking about "the international dialogue" fostered by hip hop pioneers: "The diasporic conversation within hip hop, Afrobeat, jazz and many other Black musical forms provide a powerful illustration of the potential for contemporary commercialized leisure to carry images, ideas, and icons of enormous political importance between cultures." Regardless of the importance of the "profit-making calculations of the music industry […] these expressions also serve as exemplars of post-colonial culture" (ibid.). Relating to the context of the global capitalist system, it would confirm the idea that "[p]ostcoloniality, in its function as a regime of cultural value, is compatible with a worldwide market," where "[v]alue is constructed through global market operations involving the exchange of cultural commodities and, particularly, culturally 'othered' goods" (Huggan 2003: 6). While postcolonialism would

rather theoretically stand against "global processes of commodification […] the point that needs to be stressed here is that postcolonialism is *bound up*[37] with postcoloniality—that in the overwhelmingly commercial context of late twentieth-century commodity culture, postcolonialism and its rhetoric of resistance have themselves become consumer products" (ibid.). In this way, putting the aims of postcolonialism into perspective with the realities of postcoloniality allows us to develop the issue of commercial cultural appropriation.

Following World War II, the worldwide struggle against colonialism in Africa, Asia, and Latin America fostered and was encouraged by an anti- and postcolonial literature calling "attention to conditions of austerity and oppression operative everywhere in the Third World" (Lipsitz 1994: 28). It was about "translat[ing] national independence into something more than neo-colonial economic, cultural, and even political dependency" (ibid.). Highlighting "the failures of newly independent regimes," in the context of the global economic system characterized by market economy and multilateral trade framed by the neoliberal ideology imposing its standards and codes on the world economy,[38] would then show that "post-colonial expressions address emerging problems in the present as well as the failures of the past." In this way, "[p]ost-colonial art also exposes the inadequacy of national 'imagined communities' to monitor, regulate, and remedy the explosive contradictions of global structures of economic, political, and cultural power" (ibid.: 29).

For instance, black cultural nationalism, when thought of as incorporated into the Black Atlantic, would show how "to turn national minorities into global majorities by affirming a solidarity with 'people of color' all around the globe" (ibid.: 31). In this respect, it is interesting to note the evolution of Malcolm X's political doctrine from his release from prison in 1952 to his assassination in 1965.[39] It evolved from a strong adherence to the Nation of Islam (NI)

[37] Highlighted by Huggan, the quoted author.

[38] These "standards and codes," or "rules of the game," are defined by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), or standardization bodies specialized in particular sectors, such as the International Organization of Securities Commissions (FMI 2016).

[39] Malcolm Little was born into a Garveyite family in 1925 but changed his last name after being converted in prison to the thoughts of the Nation of Islam and its former leader Elijah Muhammad: "The Black Muslim 'X' replaced his 'slave name' and he became a minister of the Nation of Islam shortly after his release in 1952." Malcolm X then became "the best-known evangelist for the separatist Muslim faith," but he quit the organization in March 1964 to convert to orthodox Islam while secularizing his political doctrine and denouncing Elijah Muhammad as a "religious faker" (Van Deburg 1997: 106). Malcolm X, also wearing the Sunni Muslim name El-Haj Malik El-Shabazz since his redirection to Sunni Islam, founded a new organization in June 1964 called the Organization of Afro-American Unity: "His motto, 'by any means necessary', reflected the pragmatic approach of his new organization […] modeled on the organization of African Unity" (Robinson 2001: 46).

organization,[40] promoting a form of religious black nationalism tinged with black American supremacism, to the dissemination of an internationalist and pan-African message aimed at all "Third World" populations and their diaspora. Thus, a core element of Malcolm X's post-NI political ideology is to be found in his inclination to consider the situation of the black American minority as analogous to that of colonized peoples, and, consequently, to denounce the colonialism of which the "blacks" all around the world were victims:

> So 1964 will see the Negro revolt evolve and merge into the world-wide black revolution that has been taking place on this earth since 1945. The so-called revolt will become a real black revolution. Now the black revolution has been taking place in Africa and Asia and in Latin America. Now when I say black, I mean non-white. Black, brown, red or yellow. Our brothers and sisters in Asia, who were colonized by the Europeans, our brothers and sisters in Africa, who were colonized by the Europeans, and in Latin America, the peasants, who were colonized by the Europeans, have been involved in a struggle since 1945 to get the colonialists, or the colonizing powers, the Europeans, off their land, out of their country (*The Black Revolution is Part of World-wide Struggle* (April 1964), in Breitman 2008: 86).

While the media paid little attention to Malcolm X after his assassination, Cone (2002: 9) states: "Eight years of Reaganism and savage attacks on poor blacks so shocked the black community that it led them to view Malcolm X differently." He has become a kind of "urban icon" in rap music, hip hop culture, and more generally in American popular culture,[41] "symbolizing [the anger of young people] against white racism and against middle-class blacks, deaf to the groans of their brothers and sisters abandoned in the ghettos," and remaining "a source of inspiration and hope that [young blacks] can be somebody in such an environment of despair and death" (ibid.: 10). If "the ghost of Malcolm X loomed large" (Robinson 2001: 65) in the African

[40] The Nation of Islam is a historically separatist American religious organization led by Elijah Muhammad from 1934 to 1975 (before the group split in two, one part rejecting Elijah Muhammad's thought and embodied by his own son, Wallace Muhammad, and the other rehabilitating Elijah Muhammad's thought and embodied by Louis Farrakhan) that has chosen a self-defined form of adherence to Islam at odds with the "Judeo-Christian values" of American society. It develops a heterodox theology advocating black supremacism to subvert the white supremacist paradigm and proposes an easy explanation for it and the racism being its driving force: the white population oppressed non-whites due to genetic programming. The organization thus incurred the wrath of Sunni Islam, which branded it a sect for its flouting of Islamic universalism, in which race, ethnicity, and nationality are only secondary to the universal religious community. NI, however, avoided any comparison and refuted any link between black America and African populations deemed "primitive and savage." Thus, it was on the American continent that it proposed to establish a black nation. With conservative elements in NI considering political struggles a waste of time, it was over the question of their relevance that differences with Malcolm X emerged, in a context where he himself was questioning (even more than usual) the effectiveness of NI's ideological principles to which he had adhered since his time in prison (Robinson 2001: 37–39; Guedj 2004: 4–5; Breitman 2008: 51).

[41] Spike Lee's biographical movie on Malcolm X, based on his autobiography and starring Denzel Washington in the title role, is a good example, playing a part in the phenomenon.

American communities, the economic potential of such an effervescence is not to be overlooked for anyone wishing to take advantage of the market represented by black people in the US:

> The 'X' has become a fashionable symbol, a sought-after product, analogous to basketball superstars such as Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan. Wall Street professionals can even be seen wearing the symbol while running in Central Park! [The] white establishment, which Malcolm X found so hard to destroy, is now profiting from it (Cone 2002: 11).

Nevertheless, one aspect of this "Malcolmania" is that political discourses, practices, and strategies from African American leaders and thinkers such as Malcolm X "have proved crucial to the success of anti-racist movements on many continents, but they now also hold significance as a model of transnational mobilization for other aggrieved populations" (Lipsitz 1994: 31). It is a dynamic that would show again how "[p]ost-colonial cultural expressions are based in the experiences of people and communities, rather than on the master narratives of the nation state" (ibid.: 32). Hip hop being based on real life experiences and being rooted now "in the day-to-day experiences of millions of inner city teens", it gives "more permanence than earlier teen trends" (Wright 2004: 10).

In addition to a first political stance of postcolonialism, which is to share "disillusionment with the nation state and its failed promises," the consumption of postcolonial cultural artifacts would be encouraged from its "stories of exile and return [that] often employ the historical displacement of formerly colonized populations to express a more general sense of cultural displacement engendered everywhere by mass communication, population migrations, and the destructive effects of 'fast capital' on traditional communities" (Lipsitz 1994: 30). While consuming postcolonial products relies on a diversity of motives, from simple human curiosity to "fascination with (but not respect for) the 'exotic'," "strategies of signification and grammars of opposition" developed in postcolonial cultural artifacts "speak powerfully to the paradoxically fragmented and interconnected world created by new structures of commerce culture and technology" (ibid.). In analyzing the materiality and concretizations of postcolonialism within the context of global capitalist markets and networks it appears necessary to approach postcolonial cultural products such as rap music and the concrete condition and experience of postcoloniality from which it emerges. This guiding line led to Huggan (2003: 28) developing the notion of "postcolonial exotic," which "occupies a site of discursive conflict between a local assemblage of more or less related oppositional practices

and a global apparatus of assimilative institutional/commercial codes." Speaking in terms of "regimes of value," Huggan (2003: 28) highlights

> one regime—postcolonialism—that posits itself as anti-colonial, and that works toward the dissolution of imperial epistemologies and institutional structures; and another—postcoloniality—that is more closely tied to the global market, and that capitalises both on the widespread circulation of ideas about cultural otherness and on the worldwide trafficking of culturally 'othered' artifacts and goods.

Therefore, emphasizing this "constitutive tension within the postcolonial might help explain its abiding ambiguity" (ibid.).

Thus, marketed and legitimized as the mainstream art form it is today, hip hop arts and culture appear as commodified postcolonial cultural objects emergent from and framed by the experiences of minority groups in the US. As Béthune (2011: 183) underlines when speaking of Rose's work, "'Black' refers neither to a race, nor even to an essence or cultural heritage, but functions as an implicit operator of minority." Thus,

> efforts to minimize the negritude[42] of hip hop culture, as well as those to legitimize its content (graffiti exhibited in museums, break dancing taken over by institutional choreographers, rappers criticized for their use of the word nigger [in English in the original quote] or gangsta clichés...) are all part of a comparable intention: to tear this form of expression away from the minority where it is so firmly rooted (ibid.).

More precisely, on the context of commodification of a postcolonial cultural object, Lipsitz (1994: 5) states:

> As the rapid flow of capital undermines formerly stable identities and brings into being new networks and circuits of communication, cultural questions take on crucial political importance […] Popular music has helped aggrieved groups to make their local struggles visible all around the world and it has tapped the conduits of commodity exchange within commercial culture to build coalitions capable of circumventing the political and cultural constraints of any one nation state. By playing on the contradictions between nation state and the capitalist economies they sustain and support, popular musicians have sometimes successfully used commercial culture as a vehicle for political agitation and education. Their music reflects the imperatives of the commercial and industrial matrices from which they emerge; in challenging the nation state

[42] In French, the author uses the word "*négrité*."

> from time to time, they accept the centrality of commodity exchange to contemporary culture and politics. Yet by operating through commodities, they also acquire authority and influence far beyond the borders of their own face-to-face communities.

The "winds of capitalism" and glocalization have allowed hip hop to spread throughout the world, oscillating between anchoring itself in reality and entertaining a wide range of audiences. Considering that "Hip-Hop has become a legitimate means, especially rap, of escaping poverty," and remembering Public Enemy member Chuck D's idea of claiming rap music as the CNN of the ghetto, it appears that "rappers are like journalists who report on sensational events in tough neighborhoods [while] these same TV channels sometimes only scratch the surface of this reality, flattering the tastes of the general public by offering them news that's easy to digest" (Gadet 2010: 71, 77). This might show that "from its inception to this day, hip-hop has used products, has produced, and has been a product itself" (Ochmann 2013: 432). If commodification crosses hip hop genres and universes, those of rap music, and especially gangsta rap, give precious clues about this dynamic.

Indeed, Martiniello (2013: 90) points out: "When there is a demand for cultural or religious goods with purchasing power, an offer to meet it could emerge, giving rise to a market multiculturalism that in fact reflects a market recognition of ethnicity." As explained above, studies on gangsta rap have shown that "[i]f the protagonists of gangsta rap agree that the authenticity of their lyrics is simply a reflection of their reality – that of the 'black experience in the ghetto' – these latter quickly realized that they could benefit from this assertion" (Freitas 2011: 96; Quinn 2005; Charnas 2010). The objective was to reap the greatest possible profit by capitalizing on a new demand from the American and global music market, a demand that was created and sustained by gangsta rap. It would thus appear that in this case "[t]he subcultural experience becomes […] a workable and marketable product," and "racial authenticity" is "a guarantee of industrial quality" (Bouyahia 2011: 7). Besides, broadly speaking, "rap music can be considered to be at the crossroads of two conceptions of storytelling." On one hand is "a narrative that, through stories and music, delivers the torments of a 'black soul';" on the other, "a narration, established as a marketing strategy, for the promotion of a product" (Freitas 2011: 116). This sounds rather like what Fanon (2001 [1964]: 44) says about blues music:

> This is how the blues 'black slaves' complaint' is presented to the admiration of the oppressors. It's a bit of stylized oppression that belongs to the exploiter and the racist. Without oppression and racism no blues. The end of racism would sound the death knell for great black music... As

> the all too famous Toynbee would say, the blues is a slave's answer to the challenge of oppression.

Freitas (2011: 116) adds that "the association between art and commerce is a dualism that has been a constituent dualism of African-American culture since at least the birth of the blues." It would indeed be a matter for these artists "to put on a mask or to take on a role in a show for which an audience has paid to attend" (ibid.). Fanon (1952: 11) has said that "often what is called the black soul is a construction of the white man." As discussed in the next chapter, the core idea behind such thoughts is that being a black/Afrodescendent/African diaspora person is a matter of lived experience and legacy, as with any other human being.

In parallel with this perspective, Baker Jr.'s 1984 book *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* "valorizes the 'bluesiness' of American culture and literature and insists upon the importance of the Afro-American vernacular to American cultural consciousness" (Gwin 1986: 476). In the same way, the very raw realism, or "gangsta realism" (Nyawalo 2013: 462), often embedded in hip hop genres such as engaged or gangsta rap, dirty south, trap music, or drill music, can be understood both through an analysis of the systemic structures that created the material conditions of existence in the predominantly black inner cities from which this musical genre emerged, as well as through an analysis of the cultural history and ideas that influenced hip hop as a platform and federation of artistic practices and disciplines. The song "Hip Hop" and its music video (1999), as well as the album title *RBG: Revolutionary but Gangsta* (2004), both by the iconic rap band Dead Prez, are good examples of this.

These developments highlighting the importance of the cultural history in the emergence and commodification of hip hop as a postcolonial cultural product leads us to consider recent public controversies about "cultural appropriation" and "white privilege" in the US rap, R&B, and pop music industry. If popular culture allows us to expand "our experience and understanding by seeing the world through the eyes of the others," it "often reduces the lived experiences of gender, ethnicity, class, and race that contain and constrain people to exotic stereotypes that serve to build dramatic tension and texture, but which elide history" (Lipsitz 1994: 160). The rapper J. Cole, considered as one of the best lyricists in US rap, references the debate in "Fire Squad" (2014):

History repeats itself and that's just how it goes/ Same way that these rappers bite each other's flows

Same thing that my nigga Elvis did with Rock n Roll/ Justin Timberlake, Eminem and then Macklemore

While silly niggas argue over who gon' snatch the crown/ Look around my nigga, White people have snatch the sound

J. Cole exposes the social problem of white privilege as applied to the American music industry. White artists practicing black music would enjoy greater prestige than their black counterparts and would find it easier to achieve success by practicing a "black" art form in a predominantly white society. Elvis Presley with rock n roll,[43] Justin Timberlake with R&B, Gwen Stefani with pop music, and Macklemore, Eminem, or Iggy Azalea with hip hop and rap music would be some examples of people having benefited from this dynamic. This privilege can be defined as the level of social advantage that comes with being perceived as part of the "norm" in a society. It would thus be more advantageous to be white in a majority-white society and to take advantage of this situation in comparison to other groups of people. Therefore, according to certain critics and observers: "Through commodification and cultural appropriation, white artists have used their white privilege to surpass their African American counterparts in genres that have historically belonged to black culture" (Dobbs 2017: n.p.).

Speaking of the US rap music industry, Macklemore has repeatedly acknowledged advantages: "I benefit from that privilege and I think that mainstream Pop culture has accepted me on a level that they might be reluctant to, in terms of a person of color" (in Tardio 2013). In 2014, Macklemore and co-producer Ryan Lewis won the Grammy Award for "Best Rap Album of the Year," just ahead of Kendrick Lamar's *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City* (2012), which many foresaw as winning this category. The decision was met with significant controversy in the US and abroad. Subsequently, Macklemore released a statement to Kendrick Lamar indicating that he felt unworthy of having won. Years later, he expanded on this: "Here I am at the highest level of artistic merit, the Grammys, and here I am benefiting from the same shit I've been talking about. So I was conflicted" (cited in Lavin 2021). He addressed such contemporary issues of structural racism in two songs "White Privilege" (2005) and "White Privilege II" (2016):

[43] A music coming from blues music, as the famous French rock artist Johnny Hallyday sings in "*La musique que j'aime*" ["The Music I Love"] (1973): "All the music I love/ It comes from there, it comes from the blues/ Words are never the same/ To express what is the blues."

> He ponders in the song ["White Privilege II"] if it was his place to be there, chanting 'Black Lives Matter' [in protests], when he is not part of the group being marginalized. This sentiment parallels his career, where he puts a 'pop' spin on a genre that has been a voice for discriminated-against black people, which some may see as diluting the message" (Dobbs 2017: n.p.).

Eminem is undeniably the most acknowledged white rapper and one of the world's most recognized hip hop artists. Enjoying massive worldwide success, he provided white audiences with a credible entry point into rap music and hip hop culture after criticism of the rapper Vanilla Ice and the rap band Beastie Boys. Actually, "[i]t's never been impossible to be a white rapper. But in such cases, it's often been better to be endorsed by black people" (Bertot 2012: 35), which Dr. Dre did having heard for the first time Eminem's incredible gifts for rap music (while unaware that he was white). After a few studio sessions together, Dr. Dre wanted to produce him and sign him to his label Aftermath Entertainment, but, as he explained during his speech for the induction of Eminem into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2022: "Then came the backlash: 'Look at him, Dre. This guy has blue eyes. We can't sign him.' There was a massive amount of resistance from my whole team and people around me that didn't want me to work with him simply because he was white" (Kiser 2022).[44] In his 2016 song called "Rap God," Eminem basically claims that he is a "god of rap," which he proves (if proof were still needed) throughout the track: "Me? I'm a product of Rakim, Lakim Shabazz, 2Pac, N.W.A./ [Ice] Cube, hey, Doc, [MC] Ren, [DJ] Yella, Eazy [-E], thank you, they got Slim [Slim Shady being one of Eminem's nicknames]." Eminem thus proclaims himself as part of a rapological tradition, a product of all the emblematic figures in the history of hip hop. Nor does he forget his mentor, Dr. Dre, who was the first to knight and bless him: "I get a 'hell yeah' [a well-known hook used by Dr. Dre] from Dr. Dre."

These lines allow us to highlight that cultural and historical knowledge about artistic practices and social movements are crucial when talking about commercial cultural appropriation:

> In its most utopian moments, popular culture offers a promise of reconciliation to groups divided by differences in power, opportunity and experience. Commercial culture puts people from diverse backgrounds in contact with one another, creating contrasts that can call attention to

[44] The first rap music producer Grammy Award winner goes on to say: "While everyone else around me had their doubts, I knew that his gifts were undeniable. His raw, dark, humorous lyrics, coupled with an impeccable cadence, stood out from everything I had ever heard before. And he was humble. Both of us were. We were two artists in do-or-die situations. He was desperate to find a way to feed his family, and I was searching for something that I could sink my teeth into creatively. Each of us were exactly what the other one needed. And I was willing to bet my entire career on that. Facts."

> existing social divisions as well as to the potential for eventual unity and community. But inter-cultural communication in popular culture can also create new sources of misunderstanding, misreading, and misappropriation that exacerbate rather than remedy social divisions (Lipsitz 1994: 160–161).

As Greg Tate's book title *Everything but the Burden: What white people are taking from black culture* (2003) suggests, "the only aspect of black culture that whites cannot appropriate is the burden of being black" (Dawkins 2005: 577). Avoiding cultural misappropriation in US rap music would thus imply that white people, the majority group in this national context, should avoid "stand[ing] in silence as racial tourists while fellow rappers face inequalities right in front of them" (Dobbs 2017: n.p.). Black voices and noises must be heard, which does not prevent white people from speaking out on these issues and/or taking concrete action to educate their audiences about structural racism and discriminations, white supremacy and white privilege, slavery, colonialism and postcolonialism, etc., like Macklemore did in the above-mentioned songs. In a 2017 song, "Untouchable," Eminem also addresses such issues.

Kendrick Lamar's "Fuck Your Ethnicity" (2011) is another famous song addressing certain racial issues in the US. The chorus is very straightforward about the rapper's appreciation of it: "*Now I don't give a fuck if you/ Black, White, Asian, Hispanic, goddamnit/ That don't mean shit to me/ Fuck your ethnicity, nigga*." In addition to the very explicit rejection of the various ethnic categorizations used by the US administration, the mobilization of the racial qualifier "nigga" just after the proclamation "fuck your ethnicity" could reflect the rapper's own interpretation of this term. It seems that he views all individuals as his potential "nigga." This acceptance of the term appears even more universal than its use by Malcolm X when he spoke of "blacks" as brown, red, or yellow all over the world. Indeed, the integration of the word into the meaningful unit here appears as a stigma reversal of this term coming originally from the racist insult "nigger" (or the "n-word"). Kendrick Lamar hijacked the term "nigga" to describe potentially all human beings regardless of skin color and ethnic backgrounds and thus resume the perspective he is developing in the song, which tries to gather all his fans under the sole banner of his music.

This positioning may be interpreted in the frame of concepts such as the "third space," developed by Homi Bhabha in 1994 (Wolf 2011), and the "imagined communities," developed by Benedict Anderson in 1983 (2002). This approach would shed light on how the "global hip hop nation" provides a space for "transcultural and global dialogue" (Haupt and Rollefson

2021: 3). Indeed, discussing Western modernity from a postcolonial perspective (see below) to challenge the dominant cultural narratives with the help of Fanon's work on colonial cultural alienation, Bhabha (1994) explores the intersections and overlaps of class, gender, race, nation, generation, and location to uncover a "third space" where new forms of cultural identity emerge. The idea is to emphasize the significance of marginalized voices and experiences in shaping the understanding of culture: "[The postcolonial perspective] insists that cultural and political identity are constructed through a process of alterity" (or otherness) (Bhabha 1994: 175). The concept of interstitial space—which would enable minority and majority groups to have dialogue within the same cultural framework with a shared adherence to an imagined global community where people from different parts of the world can come together, exchange ideas, and collaborate creatively—gives some insights into the answers that hip hop can provide to questions of racism. It could help to highlight how "Hip hop is neither beholden to the past nor running blindly into the future – it is a culture of possibility. It is a culture of now" playing with the heritage of the past and the technological advancements of the future to challenge "cultural orthodoxy" (Haupt and Rollefson 2021: 4).

In the same vein, Lipsitz (1994: 34) states that:

> Post-colonial literature, Third Cinema, and hip hop music all protest again conditions created by the oligopolies who distribute them as commodities for profit […] Yet it is exactly their desire to work *through* rather than *outside*[45] of existing structures that defines their utility as a model for contemporary global politics.

It therefore gives insights into contemporary forms of political practices and discourses outside of formal and traditional political engagement. Inspired by Antonio Gramsci and his concept of "war of position" aimed at countering "the hegemonic power of the ruling class" (Egan 2016: 435), by a political and cultural struggle within a capitalist context,[46] Lipsitz (1994: 36) states:

> The global popularity of hip hop culture […] has been perhaps the most important recent manifestation of post-colonial culture on a global scale […] Although hip hop circulates as a commodity marketed by highly centralized monopolies from metropolitan countries, it also serves as a conduit for ideas and images articulating subaltern sensitivities […] Hip hop expresses a form of politics perfectly suited to the post-colonial era. It brings a community into

[45] Highlighted by Lipsitz, the quoted author.

[46] In a framing focusing on political revolutionary and counter-hegemonic strategies: "Hegemony is thus much more than simply ideology. It is rather a historically specific equilibrium in which the ruling class grants concessions to the subordinate classes in order to maintain its power" (Egan 2016: 437).

> being through performance, and it maps out real and imagined relations between people that speak to the realities of displacement, disillusion, and despair created by the austerity economy of post-industrial capitalism.

Such counter-hegemonic strategies developed by hip hop actors can be found in both commercial and socially conscious rap with the aim of "appropriating the means of defining and representing their identity" (Aterianus-Owanga 2014: 958). Indeed, by perpetuating certain stereotypes that underlie systems of oppression and are embodied in the music industry, these tactics would contribute to an effort to dismantle and "deconstruct hegemonies and orders of domination" (ibid.: 963). The common denominator of these strategies relies on "a set of postcolonial considerations and demands, such as the fight against racism and the stigmatization of black African foreignness, or the search for a definition of the self within a musical and social universe marked by Eurocentric discourses," demonstrating again the importance of music in "identifications" and "connections" within the Black Atlantic (ibid.: 967–968).

Having outlined my theoretical approach to the object of hip hop culture and rap music, I explain now my approach to the phenomenon of racism before articulating these two conceptual frameworks in the methodological section.

Chapter 3

Racism and racialization in Francophone Belgium: Understanding race as a social relationship

In his seminal book, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois states: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line." By introducing the guiding idea of his thought from the metaphors of the "veil" and the "double sight," he popularized the notion of "double consciousness," of double identity, in terms that would become globally influential. The "black" being seen only through the eyes of the "white" and the "veil of segregation" falling between these two social worlds, Du Bois intended to lift it and re-establish a circulation of glances between peoples. Nowadays, racism in European postcolonial societies is still animated by a movement of "withdrawal and exclusion." Racist ideas are disseminated, radicalized, and institutionalized through various means, shedding light on how the "perception of difference" is still "experienced as a threat, a danger for the 'memory'" in these societies (Gossiaux 1995: 171). The year 2020 saw particularly mediatized and visible racial police violence and ethnic profiling in several Western societies. This situation gave rise to public debates, ranging from the colonial past of certain countries to structural racism and multiple forms of discrimination.

In this chapter, I present my view of the concepts of racism and racialization in the Belgian context. Some of these elements are presented in the theoretical section of a collective book chapter on "decolonization" in Europe, in which I discuss the deconstruction of colonial propaganda in Belgium (Gossiaux 2026), as well as in an expert report following a study I conducted with Marco Martiniello about the impact of colonialism on contemporary forms of racism in Belgium with the aim of formulating policy recommendations for the Belgian federal government.[47] The penultimate section of the chapter discusses racialization and rap music, using the French case as an example, while the last section explains the research hypothesis.

[47] See "The persistence of colonial propaganda stereotypes: How the colonial past explains contemporary racism in Belgium" (Gossiaux and Martiniello 2025).

Section 1

The invention of race: Colonial narrative, exploitation, and structural racism

Racism refers, on the one hand, to ideologies based on a so-called hierarchy between "human races," which informed intentional oppressive practices and systems such as slavery, the slave trade, colonialism, segregation, and genocides. On the other hand, racism refers to the process of racialization whereby "the discourse of race is employed in an attempt to label, constitute or exclude social collectivities" (Rastas and Seye 2019: 593). This framework considers racism as a socially constructed category. It is a biologizing thought feeding and based on the concept of race: "Human as social animal will be read like human as physical animal" (Guillaumin [1972] 2002: 36). Indeed, "[the rejection of the other] is driven by a certain logic. That of 'definition', which consists in better defining the same or the self as opposed to the other" (Gossiaux 1995: 172). This approach thus considers racism as a system that produces and perpetuates otherness, thereby enabling the establishment of hierarchies among human beings.

We can trace the birth of racism back to the 15th century and the first European conquests in the wider world, when economic and racial oppression were invented for trade and industry and were legitimized by ideological standings: "Confronted with concrete diversity and the phenomena of industrialization and colonization, bourgeois Europe invents races in a process that constitutes racism in statu nascendi" (Guillaumin 2002: 113). Starting from the 17th century, discourses on human races are legitimized by pseudo-science allowing biological determinism of cultural traits and thus hierarchization. The French author Colette Guillaumin contributed seminally to the understanding of racism, notably through *L'idéologie raciste* (1972). She analyzes racism firstly as "the product of a relation" in which "practices" and "doctrinal production" (Naudier and Soriano 2010: 199–200) are linked in the same package, in the same "ideology." Therefore, "[i]n the term 'race', what dominates in the final analysis, is the biological sense which attracts to him the sociological meanings" (Guillaumin 2002: 113). This approach allows us to consider racism as a social phenomenon and not solely as reprehensible individual practices. It is about linking the racist ideology to the period of industrialization, the last time of slavery, and the beginning of colonization, which translates as "a sequence of transformation of social relationships" (Naudier and Soriano 2010: 198). In *L'homme prédateur: Ce que nous enseigne l'esclavage sur notre temps*, Françoise Vergès (2011: 24) highlights "the central role of slave trade and slavery in the history of humanity, and

that of the slave trade and colonial slavery in the formation of the modern world." It appears that the economic logics of colonial slavery paved the way for Europe's prosperity, in a process seeing the notion of sovereignty and the concept of nation being consolidated as founding elements of the "nation state" artifact. The questions posed by Vergès (2011: 29) can be summed up thus: "In what way does the history of slavery shed light on our present? How can we assess the extent to which the world we inhabit is founded on the 'commodification' of the human being?"

To approach racism as a structural level social phenomenon, we can go back to the works of Fanon. These highlight the social structure of racism, and the different psychological effects of structural racism on both colonized and colonizers, carrying the idea that racism is also part of institutions and socialization. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, he rejects a historical determinism making the colonized, their ancestors, and their children, prisoners of history. According to Fanon, the colonized are totally determined from outside and conditioned by the notion of race. For example, to be a black person is a lived experience, in which the notion of race organizes all social life. Therefore, the colonized are heterogeneously defined by discourses that precede and encompass their existence: "The white world, the only honorable one, barred me from all participation. A man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a black man—or at least like a nigger" (Fanon [1952] 1986: 114). In short, as Matthieu Renault asks: "What are white masks – and black masks – if not *personae*[48] to play, to mime?" (Renault 2011: 109). This leads to the mobilization of another Fanonian concept, alienation, to highlight "the ambivalence of the psychological effects of structural racism" on "both the colonized and the colonizers, even if does not apply in the same way" (Balibar 2005: 12–13).

Such emphasis on the systemic and structural aspect of racism leads us to highlight the different dimensions it gathers (historical, structural, and individual), which "coexist and reinforce each other": "This form of racism perpetuates the inequalities experienced by racialized people, particularly in terms of access to housing and public services" (CNCD 2020: 10). The European Network Against Racism (ENAR) uses several definitions of systemic racism. They have in common a desire to "clearly show an understanding of the complexities of racial discrimination, how it has been constructed over time and how it manifests itself today" (ENAR 2019: 10). The

[48] Highlighted by Renault, the quoted author. Beyond condemning racism, it was a matter of freeing oneself from the conditions of meaning and recognition imposed through the creation of the colonizers' social world (Vergès 2005; Gordon 2008).

influence of propaganda mechanisms from the colonial past in perpetuating systemic racism seems then to be a central element to consider in the understanding of contemporary racism and the struggles against it.

The striking resurgence of the visibility of racism in different societies and national settings in recent years has demonstrated that its persistence could not be understood without historical contextualization and, in the case of a former colonial power like Belgium, without highlighting the links between colonialism and racism. It is also about highlighting "the question of institutional discrimination related to the destabilization of political communities (starting with nations)" inside postcolonial societies (Balibar 2005: 16). Bastenier (2014: 98) asks: "How can we fail to see that, in the face of migratory flows of sub-Saharan origin, whole sections of the European mentality are impregnated with representations that reproduce the inequality of the social and cultural relations that were taken for granted between colonizers and colonized?" These brief thoughts on the historicity and structural feature of racism help us to move on to the Belgian colonial narrative, knowing already that the colonial project was used early in Belgium's existence to feed the national identity, as a "feeling of national unity" (Mazzocchetti 2014: 15).

The Belgian colonial project began at the "Berlin Conference" in 1885, when Leopold II, the second "King of the Belgians," was granted absolute sovereignty over a territory he personally acquired in Central Africa. This Conference crystallized European colonial imperialism in Africa. It allowed for the structuring of the colonial empires of the time by establishing the rules for the colonization of Africa and by formalizing the division of the continent between the colonizing powers, without any representative or leader of the African countries and populations concerned. Under the pretext of achieving humanitarian objectives and guaranteeing access to "progress" and "civilization," the opportunity was to lay down the rules of colonization. If the Conference took a diplomatic form, it was an economic one (Florestal 2007).

From 1885 to 1908, Leopold II granted himself 10% of the Congolese territory on a private basis, the rest being devolved to concessionary companies. This territory was called the "Congo Free State" or the "Independent State of the Congo" ("*État Indépendant du Congo* [EIC]"). In 1908, following several accusations of brutality, violence, chaotic administrative management, and accumulations of debts to the Belgian state, Leopold II was obliged to hand over the EIC

to the Belgian Parliament. The EIC became the Belgian Congo, which obtained its independence in 1960 to become the Democratic Republic of Congo. In 1919, Belgium successfully claimed a mandate at the League of Nations (which will become the United Nations) to administer the territory of "Ruanda-Urundi." This former German colony was administratively annexed to the "Belgian Congo" in 1925. In the early 1960s, these Belgian colonies became formally independent (Peltier 2018).

The Berlin Conference reminds us that Africa's colonization in the 19th century took place in a historical configuration where the European powers realized the continent's immeasurable natural wealth after various exploratory expeditions. Africa was literally cut up like a cake, its internal borders redefined arbitrarily, and its populations and ethnocultural groups divided with no consent, which still has far-reaching consequences today. As the Berlin Conference succeeded in legitimizing the de facto position of Africa as a source of wealth to be exploited for the benefit of others, this founding event of colonialism is still present in the memories of many African countries, populations, and diasporas. The so-called "civilizing mission" that these powers claimed to defend was a smokescreen to cover the pursuit of commercial missions (Alcandre 2016). The case of the EIC is a telling example.

The notion of civilizing mission is part of a larger set of political discourses forming what we can consider as colonial propaganda. With Leopold II's ambition to give the young Kingdom of Belgium a colonial project, a whole propaganda mechanism was elaborated to convince Belgian citizens, but also the colonized, of the benefits of colonization: "Colonial propaganda, supported by the press, literature, theatre and of course the great exhibitions, was born at the same time as the conquests and represented an extraordinary communication campaign founded on a fantasy world born at the back of our conscience. These colonial images still inhabit our imaginary" (Chalaye 2001: n.p.). Unia underlines the links between stereotypes developed through colonial propaganda and current stereotypes fed by modern media. Based on studies and reports, the public institution explains: 'The "primitive Black person" of the colonial past, who was close to nature, unintelligent and only capable of performing manual and physical labour, is still largely embedded in 21st century mind-sets" (Unia 2017: 8).

As an expert report about public space decolonization (see below) in Brussels points out: "Colonization was part of a larger national project around which the identity of Belgian citizens could be constructed" (Urban.Brussels 2022: 8–9). The colonial project was intended to be used

as a catalyst for the development of the Belgian "national identity." From this moment, the Belgian authorities "sought to invent a nation" (Couvreur 2010: 3) and Leopold II sought to "give the kingdom, which he found too unambitious, an international stature" (ZIN TV 2022: 19). Colonial propaganda began to be framed in this way back in the 1870s when Leopold II ordered the first exploration expeditions in Africa. The idea of a colonial project did not particularly mobilize the population, and "it was therefore necessary to convince it of its legitimacy by deploying an intense propaganda campaign which began before the creation of the Independent State of the Congo" (ZIN TV 2022: 22). The Belgian colonial enterprise was then supported by an important propaganda based on a particular narrative articulated around a "civilizing mission." This narrative was spread through different instruments that did not disappear with the political independence of the former colonies. For example, in Belgium, the first colonial exhibition was organized in 1885. The purpose of these exhibitions and other "human zoos" was to impose and fix in people's minds an image representing the "good primitive savage" to be civilized in order to legitimize the colonial project from the point of view of law and morality among the citizens of the colonizing countries (ZIN TV 2022: 22). The massive dissemination of a racist ideology based on the notion of "white supremacy" was thus at the heart of the Belgian colonial project, to legitimize its implementation. Before returning to Belgian colonial propaganda through empirical analysis, it is necessary to further explain the understanding of racism I developed for this study by explaining in more detail the processes I consider to be at its heart.

Section 2

Approaching racism issues in contemporary Francophone Belgium

The previous developments show how "[r]acism is first and foremost a political object where 'theory' and 'combat' are inextricably linked. Any public use of it sets off an immediate chain reaction of effects" (Balibar 2005: 3). Speaking about the "decolonial" struggles and movements of people of African descent in Belgium, they are quite diverse: "they do not all have the same objectives or interests, and are driven by activists who position themselves according to their history, affiliations and affinities. What they have in common is that activists no longer accept 'traditional' anti-racist discourse or the established order" (Caprioli 2021: 19; Gossiaux 2020). In Belgium, before 2020, "the mainstream media, and the party-political apparatus [had] little appetite for engaging in a meaningful and long-lasting re-examination of its colonial past" (Goddeeris 2015: 406). The present section aims to contextualize

contemporary forms of resistance to racism in Belgium by considering postcolonial thinking, decoloniality, and intersectionality, before relating to it in the empirical analysis.

Contextualizing the postcolonial debate in Belgium involves first acknowledging that "Belgium was largely regarded as a 'latecomer', both as a former colonial power and as a postcolonial society critically looking back at its history" (Verbeeck 2020: 294). Indeed, it "has a difficult relationship with its colonial past." Citizens know little about Congolese migration. Yet "'contemporary' racism is strongly influenced by its historical context" (Unia 2017: 8) and by the colonial past of Belgium. "Past" racism and "present" racism are strongly linked in Belgium, as the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent (WGEPAD), mandated by the UN, observed during its tour in Belgium (WGEPAD 2019a; Urban.Brussels 2022: 48–49). While this "repressed past" "offers few opportunities to confront discriminatory issues, both socio-political and symbolic," it appears that "different groups are calling for substantive debates about a shared history [...] as well as, their possibilities for success, recognition and dignity" (Mazzocchetti 2014: 19, 13). With the colonial history of Belgium becoming a central part of the anti-racist conversation these last two decades, "analysts have sought to account for the continuities that exist between the colonial domination of the indigenous population in the colonies, and the ways in which newcomers and migrants are subjected to a discourse of integration" (Fadil and Martiniello 2020: 3).

As highlighted in the introduction to the General Recommendations about the creation of an African diasporas Cultural Center in Brussels (see Chapter 12): "The historical context of colonization, the long-standing links between Belgium and the nationals of former Belgian colonies and protectorates (DRC, Rwanda and Burundi) imply a particular relationship of the latter to Belgium" (Collectif MCA 2019: 4). Indeed, postcolonial and sub-Saharan African immigration in Belgium has been attested to for a long time and illustrates a specificity with populations arriving from the former colony and the regions administrated by Belgium. If these populations do not constitute "new migrations" (Martiniello et al. 2010), it is only in recent decades that this immigration has become significant (Mazzocchetti 2014; Kagné 2008).

Another particularity of the presence of people from sub-Saharan African countries in Belgium is that they constitute the vast majority of the category of individuals referred to as "blacks": "This is why the designations 'African' or 'Sub-Saharan' are commonly used in the Belgian public space, both as a synonym and as a euphemism for the racial category 'black'"

(Mazzocchetti 2014: 12). The skin color seems to play a central role in the difficulties of Belgian society to assume a relation to "the black 'otherness'" (Unia 2017: 4). Indeed, an extensive survey conducted among Belgian Congolese, Belgian Rwandan and Belgian Burundian citizens shows "a very high level of racial discrimination" against these people. These discriminations affect many areas of life such as employment, housing, public spaces and locations, relations with institutions, and education, among others, where situations of racism and discrimination are documented. As Demart et al. (2017: 207) put it:

> we can see that explicit racist insults are part of the Belgian social reality. A reality of which the Afrodescendants are the privileged witnesses […] Insults, negative, belittling and humiliating representations of Africans (beasts, slow, savage, non-human, dirty, etc.) constitute a pervasive, highly problematic imagery which this population is confronted and in which the younger ones are socialized.

In a paper exploring "Belgian postcolonial remembering as enacted in public space," Goddeeris (2015: 399) underlines that the colonial propaganda displayed on much of Brussels' public space "shows that Belgium keeps fostering its colonial past, or at least [does] not realize that such street names can be causing sensitive reactions." In Brussels and many other Belgian cities, a substantial number of street names, squares, boulevards, parks, commemorative plaques, statues, and memorials glorify the Belgian colonial period through symbolic racialist representations, in which the white man is systematically presented as superior to the black man (Stanard 2020). Although Belgium was one of the most criticized colonial empires at the time, the Belgian colonial project was glorified in the public space without any questioning by the authorities until the 2000s, when this glorification began to be explicitly criticized by various initiatives from activists and scholars. The Belgian public sphere is thus steeped in the colonial past and, above all, in the ideological trickle of racist propaganda of the time. This explains the demand for historical introspection on the part of Belgium by part of its population in order that such a work of remembrance can be useful to the wishes of democracy and inclusiveness in a multicultural society (Urban.Brussels 2022: 10).

These initiatives reflect a change in the general postcolonial attitude in Belgium, with issues no longer being denied but appearing more prominently in public debate, especially since 2020 and the worldwide protests against police violence and structural racism. This change in attitude is also reflected in the link between the treatment of postcolonial memory in Belgium and the persistence of contemporary forms of racism and structural discrimination. It is mainly a new

generation of activists of African origin born in Belgium who are now spearheading these struggles, using new forms of collective action in their repertoire such as social media to make all their initiatives visible (Goddeeris 2015: 400–403). While compared to neighboring countries "the African diaspora in Belgium does not succeed in occupying much space in the postcolonial memory" (ibid.: 404), Mbembe (2020: n.p.) highlights that "[t]he end of doubt about the reality of racism and its structural character, and the conviction that racism represents a threat far beyond its immediate targets, constitute a virtual shift on the imaginary, cultural and political levels alike." The question now is to identify how this new politicization of postcolonial issues will pave the way for "new possibilities for action and reflection, and what these are likely to lead to" (ibid.) considering Belgium's specific political context of multi-party coalition, in which parties far apart on the political spectrum sometimes must govern together. As Goddeeris (2015: 404) underlines when speaking of public spaces or folkloric events that led to criticism and condemnation of Belgium by some international institutions or NGOs, "[a] decolonization of the mind has yet to occur" in Belgium.

> Decolonization is the undoing of colonialism, the latter being the process whereby imperial nations establish and dominate foreign territories, often overseas. The meanings and applications of the term are disputed. Some scholars of decolonization focus especially on independence movements in the colonies and the collapse of global colonial empires. Other scholars extend the meaning to include economic, cultural and psychological aspects of the colonial experience.

This *Wikipedia* quote about "Decolonization" (2023a) introduces the notion of decoloniality in this research. As Boulbina (2018: n.p.) puts it: "Decolonization may be understood as a desire for change, or as a need for change; nothing about the concept tells us, however, what this change should be. There is no orienting grid to give us directions in advance." In fact, increasingly diverse approaches and thoughts emerge or are updated in the aim of pleading for the decentering and the end of the monopoly of the "West" on production, representation, dissemination, and, more generally, on our own relationship to knowledge. It would be a matter of decolonization of thought to "propose a decentralized humanism that would have as its political quest inclusion, the common," as called for by Hamidou Anne (2019: 103). Decolonization, understood as emancipation from colonial empires after World War II, took on a global dimension in the 20th century through the action of independence and social movements

in all regions of the world.[49] However, independence and the creation of these new states has not put an end to the relations of domination at international level and in the globalized capitalist economy (Nasser 2023).

During the 1980s, the field of "postcolonial studies" or "postcolonialism" first emerged in the Anglo-Saxon academic world, before spreading more widely:

> Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of 'minorities' within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South. They intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic 'normality' to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantages, histories of nation, races, communities, peoples (Bhabha 1994: 171).

Edward Saïd, by demonstrating in *Orientalism* (1978) how colonialism implies a hierarchization of essentializing representations of non-Western populations, has greatly contributed to the development of postcolonial studies (Marzouki 2004). Fanon, Césaire (1950; 1987), Memmi (1957), and more recently Mbembe (2000, 2013) have also made foundational contributions to this school of thought. The starting point of postcolonial studies was a clear observation: "The decolonization of countries formerly colonized by Europe [...] did not put an end to the presence, real or phantom, of the colonizing state. Intercolonial ties survive national liberation" (L'Heuillet, 2017: 41). The term "neo-colonialism" (Nkrumah 1973) also describes such a configuration where the persistence of various forms of "imperial power relations" after independence explains the emergence of a "post-colonial" critique, where the prefix "post" designates a historical situation subsequent to the colonial era, as well as a variety of geographical situations other than those of "Europe" (Renault 2011: 20–21).

Going further, "procedural" decolonization (Anne 2019: 101) implies that independence "is not synonymous with decolonization (of power and minds); it is merely the condition of possibility" (Renault 2011: 20). Beyond this political perspective, postcolonial criticism is an epistemic project. The aim is to deconstruct the "coloniality of knowledge" (see below) by taking "a broader perspective" (35). As explained by Fanon (1963: 36):

[49] For example, in 1927, Brussels hosted the first international conference to fight colonial and imperial systems. Participants to this "Congress of Oppressed Nationalities," with representatives, organizations, associations, and political parties from 34 countries, considered it an "experience of planetary solidarity," which ultimately led to the Bandung Conference in 1955 and the Non-Aligned Movement, which gathered newly independent countries that wanted to avoid being in the geopolitical bosom of the Soviet Union or the US (Petersson 2016: 131).

> Decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature, which in fact owe their originality to that sort of substantification which results from and is nourished by the situation in the colonies […] In fact, the settler is right when he speaks of knowing 'them' well. For it is the settler who has brought the native into existence and who perpetuates his existence. The settler owes the fact of his very existence, that is to say, his property, to the colonial system.

This quote highlights that the historical condition of the emergence of colonialism is complicated by its own specificity; namely, that the colonizer makes the colonized. Indeed, the build-up of European territories as the entity "Europe" and as the center of the world was not based solely on the exploitation of resources and populations from other continents, but required "inventing modernity's Other, its antithesis, the barbarian" (Rougier 2019: 118). For the former colonized people, this means being able to define, express, and represent themselves no longer within the frame of the colonizer. Thus, according to Fanon (1963: 36–37): "Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the 'thing' which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself."

The founding gesture of postcolonial critique is therefore the decentering of Europe in the meaning of "pluralizing the places where discourse and knowledge are produced, with a concomitant fragmentation of history and the assertion of multiple historicities." Therefore, according to Renault (2011: 21), "[b]efore any 'theory' (axioms, ideas, arguments, statements, etc.), postcolonialism designates a reversal of perspectives." Decolonization of power, minds, knowledge, or arts and culture (Gossiaux 2021b), then appears as "the very project of postcolonial criticism, the project of postcolonial studies"[50] (Renault 2018: 2). These views can be summed up in the words of Guillaumin (2002: 36):

> They're going to start *naming themselves* and *being named* again.[51] In fighting the West, people invented themselves; in their struggle, they imposed on the other side a concrete, resistant image of themselves – irreducible to the fantasies that had previously nourished the mask the dominant imposed on their existence. They had come close to taking this mask for themselves. For it is not the least of the problems of the minority 'condition' to be caught up in the vertigo of the mask held out to them by the majority.

[50] In English in the original quote.

[51] Highlighted by Guillaumin, the quoted author.

Postcolonial thinking allows us thus to think of the modern world by remembering that colonialism and "the imposed universality of Western-derived modernity" is one of its founding pillars (Iveković 2021: 38–39).

This underscoring of "the co-constitutive relationship between modern thought and colonialism" is called "coloniality of power" by Anibal Quijano (1992), who made major contributions to decolonial studies and critical theory. This concept refers to "the specific structure of the forms of domination produced by 'modern' thought" (Decault 2016: 16). The coloniality of power thus finds its foundations in "the exploitation of labor power, ethno-racial domination, patriarchy and the control of forms of subjectivity (or the imposition of a Eurocentric cultural orientation)" (ibid.). Indeed, the author introduces the idea of "power matrix" to highlight its main features, being capitalism, colonialism, and eurocentrism: "In other words, coloniality is constituted in the matrix of this power, which is capitalist, colonial/modern and Eurocentric. This coloniality of power has proved more durable and more deeply rooted than the colonialism within which it was engendered, and which it helped to impose worldwide" (Quijano 2007: 112). In this perspective, the idea of "race" has become the "most effective instrument of social domination" of the last five centuries; globalized capitalism would be pervaded by race understood as the "mode and result of modern colonial domination":

> Race was imposed as the fundamental criterion for universal social classification of the world's population, and it was around it that the main social and geocultural identities of the world at the time were distributed [...] The euro-centricity of capitalist world power and the resulting global distribution of labor and exchange were founded on the notion of race (ibid.: 111).

Relating this to Fanon saying that the colonizer owes his very existence to the colonial system, it appears that decolonization is explicitly bounded by postcolonial thinking. Given the concept of coloniality of power, the term "decoloniality" embraces this way of thinking of modernity and its systems of power (economic, cultural, (geo)political), along with intersubjective dimensions (Boulbina 2018: n.p.). According to Mbembe (2006: 120): "The postcolonial critique shows that our global modernity needs to be viewed in context well before the nineteenth century, starting with the period when the merchandization of private property was conducted hand-in-hand during the slave trade with that of people." Considering decoloniality as "the product of the encounter between Europe and the worlds it once made into its distant possessions" (ibid.: 127), I think this approach can help the analysis of the political dimension of race in different national and local settings of rap music. Indeed, decoloniality aims to give

a voice to (formerly) colonized people and groups, to give more space to marginalized narratives and to break free from hierarchies of power and knowledge in the aim of cultural and political emancipation (Acosta 2019). It would be about claiming bottom-up "radical equality" by combining postcolonial thinking and practices inspired by decolonization (Urban.Brussels 2022: 50).

In so doing, decoloniality questions and exemplifies the interweaving of different social relationships in the maintenance of forms of domination and unequal systems. This leads us to "intersectionality" (or intersectional theory), developed by the critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991) to study the discriminatory effects and structures of the domination of minority groups intersecting socially experienced identities built around "race," age, class, religion, sex, gender, sexual orientation, disability, etc. Drawing on the work of black and postcolonial feminisms such as Angela Davis (1974), bell hooks (1982; 1984), Audre Lorde (1984), and Patricia Hill Collins (1990 [2021]; 2006),[52] a growing body of research in the Francophone academic world is working to impose this notion on current public debate, making it a major topic of feminist studies in the Francophone world (Martin and Roux 2015: 6).

The basic idea behind intersectionality is that "every social relationship is fundamentally articulated with other social relationships": "It shows that the modalities of this articulation and its consequences – in terms of absolute or relative privilege, in terms of marginalization and exploitation – are fundamentally historical, and therefore variable" (Lépinard and Mazouz 2021: 34–35). As Davis (2016: 10) underlines: "Black feminism has been, since its inception, a theoretical and practical attempt to demonstrate that in the society in which we live, race, gender and class are inseparable." This approach was developed in response to a critique of law and an internal critique of social movements claiming to be feminist in the US (Brun and Cosquer 2022: 46). The aim was to denounce the "hegemonic" position of middle or upper class white women in these movements and to propose a re-reading of the notion of "sisterhood."[53]

[52] Other works can be noted, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1985; 2021) for the field of subaltern studies, developed by Indian scholars and focusing on British colonization and resistances against it.

[53] For example, bell hooks would "propose a political solidarity that goes beyond the recognition of a common oppression, identifying the sources of possible political divisions and aiming for radical transformations through a lasting political commitment" (Hedjerassi 2017: 13). Indeed, according to hooks (1984: 44), the notion of "common oppression" was only invented by white women in these movements because it was "disguising and mystifying the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality."

Reviewing the emergence of feminism in the US and the place of black women and women of color in it, bell hooks (1984: 5–6) explains that "feminist emphasis on 'common oppression' in the US was less a strategy for politicization than an appropriation by conservative and liberal women of a radical political vocabulary that masked the extent to which they shaped the movement so that it addressed and promoted their class interests." The point of hooks' (1984: 92) approach on the feminist struggle in the US is clear:

> As long as the United States is an imperialist, capitalist, patriarchal society, no large female majority can enter the existing ranks of the powerful. Feminist movement is not advanced if women who can never be among those who rule and exercise domination and control are encouraged to focus on these forms of power and see themselves as victims.

This brings us to the main feature of the intersectional approach—its primary interest in minority experiences, analyzed through the intersection of several different social relations of power: "being a black woman is socially different from being a white woman or a black man. In France, being a woman of North African origin means a much higher probability of being inactive in the job market than being a woman or of North African origin alone" (Lépinard and Mazouz 2021: 26–27).[54]

Another important point to emphasize regarding intersectional theory lies in its criticism of essentialism. In her foundational work, Crenshaw (1991: 31) investigates the essentialism of public action categories from the idea that they are "problematic and criticizable" because they "elide the differences between the women's group and the Black group." Intersectionality is "far from a reification of identities, but rather a critique of essentialization, with the analysis focusing on experiences of discrimination and the resulting *minority*[55] condition" (ibid.). The point is to emphasize "ideas" and "processes" "inextricably" linked (Davis 2016: 11), shaping "experiences and identities in a variety of ways" (Lépinard and Mazouz 2021: 33).

The intersectional approach thus bears an important concern for equality fed by "feminist epistemologies of the point of view," to insist on "the need to produce a capacity for collective

[54] Another example can be found in Amandine Gay's (2021: 64–65) work about adoption in which she claims for a more comprehensive approach of the issue of producing children by "integrating issues of race, class, gender, disability and sexual orientation," in order to reinvest the field of reproductive and family policies in contemporary feminist movements, as well as in anti-racist, decolonial, and anti-capitalist movements.

[55] Highlighted by Crenshaw, the quoted author.

analysis that *takes the point of view of the dominated*,[56] and thus gives due weight to their experiences" (Lépinard and Mazouz 2021: 41–43). Speaking more concretely of political struggle, "intersectionality offers a political model that competes with abstract universalism in that it calls for equality to be concretely produced by taking into account the specific positions of one and the other, and the particular types of oppression to which one and the other are subjected" (ibid.: 66). The aim is to consider the plurality of logics of domination and social positions to promote "coalition policies" in militant movements (Fassin 2015: 5). Thus, when focusing on power in multiple social relations with this approach, it thinks

> about the way power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others. This project attempts to unveil the processes of subordination and the various ways those processes are experienced by people who are subordinated and people who are privileged by them. It is then a project that presumes that categories have meaning and consequences [assuming that] particular values […] foster and create social hierarchies [behind the existence of categories] (Crenshaw 1991: 1297).

The categories themselves are not the problem; rather, it is the fact that these social constructs would be used to "crystallize" or "veil" "difference":

> Communication, integration of immigrants, coexistence of populations and races, are therefore only possible at the price of a double asceticism: recognizing one's own difference, probing the frustrations that haunt the logic of rejection, and accepting to defer this analysis to the 'other'. The discovery of the otherness supposes necessarily this examination of conscience [...] The others are at the same time different and similar. Such is the paradox that is to be defended (Gossiaux 1995: 172–173).

Section 3

Racialization and rap music: Insights from the French case

The processes of racialization appear central to the issues at stake. Indeed, while "race exists for everyone: it's a question of seeing oneself as favorably or unfavorably racialized. To put it simply, there is no Black without White" (Soumahoro 2020: 144), as Fanon (1952) explains in his first book, *Black Skin, White Masks* ("*Peau noire, masques blancs*"). In his second book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, the same author was the first to speak about "racialization" using a sociopolitical perspective:

[56] Highlighted by Lépinard and Mazouz, the quoted authors.

> The Negro, never so much a Negro as since he has been dominated by the whites, when he decides to prove that he has a culture and to behave like a cultured person, comes to realize that history points out a well-defined path to him: he must demonstrate that a Negro culture exists. And it is only too true that those who are most responsible for this racialization of thought, or at least for the first movement toward that thought, are and remain those Europeans who have never ceased to set up white culture to fill the gap left by the absence of other cultures (Fanon 1963: 212).

Considering that hip hop is rooted in the postcolonial experience of minority groups located in US post-industrial cities leads one to think that such initial racialization still appears important today for the understanding of globalization and appropriation processes by other groups (Hammou 2018; Jeffries 2014). It is interesting to examine the notions of racialization and racization from a theoretical point of view before coming back more precisely to issues related to racialized identities in rap music using mainly the French example, being the case closest to Francophone Belgian rap music.

The concept of racialization in French and English-speaking academic fields has been subject to numerous efforts to define it since World War II, revealing a notable degree of flexibility. Nevertheless, they all converge in considering racialization as "the construction of race as a social entity" and "the processes of assignment that constitute it." This involves interpreting "race" as a "category in constant re(creation), according to a processual and relational approach: racialization creates both the dominant and the dominated" (Brun and Cosquer 2022: 29). The hierarchy of so-called human races at the basis of racism is rooted in various processes and dynamics of racialization. From this perspective, the aim is to show "how minorities are constructed and produced as minorities by being treated as such, and how they adapt to and sometimes resist this definition of the situation," thus emphasizing processes expressing a social relationship of domination and the effects of exclusion and differentiation engendered by them (Poiret 2011: 108).

Guillaumin adds a concept that goes hand in hand with racialization, that of racization. Indeed, considering racism first and foremost as the product of a relationship, the author explains that racism refers to "situations involving relations between minority and majority groups" (Naudier and Soriano 2010: 200). Thus, "the majority and the minority are not understood in a statistical sense, but defined by a power relationship" in which "the majority/minority couple is superimposed on the racist/racized couple" (Brun and Cosquer 2022: 29). The "gesture of minorization" is thus at the heart of Guillaumin's conception of racism where "race is precisely

what enables the majority to self-identify and assert its permanence." Somato-biological differences then become signifiers (Naudier and Soriano 2010: 201). This type of treatment goes beyond what is strictly defined as "racial":

> What is given as race is not necessarily a race, as we know. But certain categories, without being explicitly covered by a racial term, nonetheless bear the physical mark. And, it's worth pointing out, these groups are all minority groups, i.e., groups that are sociologically in a situation of dependence or inferiority (minor, either in power or in numbers). This is the case, for example, of certain social classes (the 'people' − the workers […]), foreigners, one of the sexes, certain age groups, alienation (in the psychiatric sense) as well as social deviance. The othered categories, in this case, are not 'racial' categories in the current sense, but they are in the latent sense insofar as their conduct, seen by the dominant society as particular, is considered to be underpinned by a somatic character (Guillaumin 2002: 94, 95).

The individuality of people from the minority groups is thus denied through a heteronomous definition derived from what the "majority" considers to be the characteristics that categorize these groups. This "biologization of perception" is therefore a "semantic phenomenon, not a concrete one." From this perspective, "*a real physical difference exists only insofar as it is so designated, as a signifier, by some culture*."[57] These signifiers vary from one culture to another" (Guillaumin 2002: 96). For example, the works of Fanon show, in a colonial setting, how the colonized could been defined, classified and minorized for the purpose of colonialism and what effects this relationship between "whites" and "blacks" could generate. Following these developments, "[t]he idea of race in social phenomena belongs to the universe of signifiers" (Guillaumin 2002: 97), as "racial categories always appear in reference to sets of categorical oppositions and relationships of domination-subordination, often coupled with relationships of exploitation" (Poiret 2011: 111).

Belonging to a minority group implies that an individual will be perceived as a "fragment" of this group and the perceptions associated with it, denying thus the individuality of the racialized person. In this sense, the hostility implied by racist conduct appears only secondary within the system that explains racism: "To reduce racism to hostility alone, to recognize it only at this extreme, is to succumb to the optical illusion that deviates from our culture's relationship with the different, and to recognize its mark in the very place where our own involvement is recognized" (Guillaumin 2002: 106). Understood in this way, racism becomes a system of "perception of otherness." It is "defined in that it applies to the foreign, the strange, the other,

[57] Highlighted by the editor.

the heterogeneous, in opposition to the homogeneous, the usual, the self. Laudation or contempt, admiration or persecution are two sides of the same coin" (ibid.: 110). It is thus "particularism" that really characterizes these groups, while the majority retain for themselves "psychological and social generality." Consequently, "[t]he relationship of minorities to the majority is covered with the seal of difference" within the framework of a "symbolic system defined by the majority" (ibid.: 120, 125). This state of the relationship between the majority group and minority groups does not mean that the latter are definitively determined by the particularities attached to them by the symbolic system marked out by the majority. Indeed, there are countless examples where

> in a subsequent stage, this same particularism, asserted, will be the driving force behind a change, and the group that the majoritarian fabricated becomes a real group [...] Black Power, the birth of the State of Israel, of African nations, Pan-Arabism are acts that escape the majority: the minority enters the scene no longer solely at the pleasure of the one who has power, no longer in the majority imaginary, but in concrete real facts (ibid.: 155).

These developments regarding Guillaumin's (2002: 210) understanding of racism as a social relationship inscribed in a symbolic system show that it is a "continuous and coherent system": "It is the colorations that change, not the system itself: hatred, apparent detachment, friendship connote an identical system of apprehension of the different." Therefore, in this relational conception of racism and the inequalities it generates, particularism and particularities are supposed to characterize minority groups according to the norm defined by the majority group or, at any rate, according to a norm with which the position of the majority coincides. For initially, as mentioned above, it is the majority that names, categorizes, and racializes. This specific theorization of racism as social relations leads thus to the coexistence of the two concepts on which it is based: racialization and racization. While "the distinction between the two concepts has not been stabilized" (Brun and Cosquer 2022: 30) in the Francophone academic field, I choose here a conception in which the concept of racization specifies that of racialization. Indeed, following Sarah Mazouz (2000: 49), I consider that "racialization designates [...] only one aspect of racialization processes [in which white people] are racialized but by no means racized." Racization specifically concerns minority groups who, in a gesture of minorization by the majority group, find themselves assigned to a dominated position. The complementarity and common denominator of the two concepts is to be found in "the designation of radical otherness as the basis of a racial frontier" (Brun and Cosquer 2022: 31). It is thus not a matter of condemning all members of the majority group as racists/racialists, but

of recognizing the structural nature of racism by highlighting the processes of racialization, which also concerns the majority group. Racialization thus affects every individual and racization is the specific process targeting minority groups.

These developments can now be put into context with insights from French rap music and hip hop culture, which represents a good parallel to Francophone Belgian rap music. Hammou (2016: 79), when studying the mainstreaming of French rap music as a cultural good associated with minority groups starting in the 1990s, demonstrated how this music was placed "on the side of the 'other' dividing into an 'us vs. them'," with commodification playing "a crucial role" within a racialized framework in which these rap music artists have to develop. To challenge this racialized framework, some rap music artists have implemented various "tactics" since the 1980s starting with denouncing police violence and types of racial profiling and racism, such as negrophobia. A second tactic developed in the mid-1990s aimed "to oppose racial self-definitions to majority racializing assignments and then, increasingly, to play with these self-definitions and assignments, to disrupt them, for political as well as aesthetic and commercial ends." In this scheme, "[t]he dominant posture, one might say, shifts from an abstract multiculturalism to the affirmation of a point of view situated in the social relations of race." These kinds of "methods of racialized self-definition" will then be used for marketing and commercial purposes (Hammou 2018: 30), as was the case with the New York and Los Angeles hip hop pioneers.

The staging of "the memory of slavery and colonization" is another development noted by the author. Indeed, the evocation of "the continuity between colonial and contemporary power relations" authorizes the classification of most of the French rap scene from the mid-1990s in a "postcolonial" approach (Hammou 2018: 31). Similarly, Béru (2011: 69) shows that these historical facts can be used by certain rappers to "generalize the historical subjection of non-white non-Europeans to white Europeans" and explain the domination of minority groups today: "For many French rappers, this unequal situation, inherited from the slave-owning and/or colonialist past, and now pervasive despite the reality of the current democratic and republican regime, can be explained by the inescapable, almost unsurpassable character of ethnoracial differentialism." We can then assume that these racized artists doubt the effectiveness of the regime of republican universalism in which they live and express their solidarity with today's oppressed groups in various aesthetic ways, which does not prevent them from being able to defend "an anti-racist vision marked by the promotion of republican universalism" (ibid.: 70).

These rap music artists highlight "unambiguously the institutionalization of racism and ethnocultural discrimination in many strata of society, just as their counterparts in the US, who are essentially African American, also evoke this societal logic." In so doing, they emphasize "historical points that have been overlooked" relating to "France's colonial enterprise [which] was the foundation and driving force behind the development of the country's economic greatness and diplomatic credit" (ibid.: 72, 73).

Hip hop arts and culture, and more specifically rap music, are globally known to have developed a lot of themes related to structural racism and discrimination, social and spatial exclusion, human rights and social justice. In France, many rap lyrics contain the idea that inequality "applies not only to distinguish French citizens from foreign residents, but also to differentiate white French citizens from their non-white fellow citizens." The stigmatization of disadvantaged neighborhoods, the French *cités* where many rappers come from, is well known and these locations can be understood as being home to "immigrant populations from countries formerly colonized by France." As underlined by Béru (2009: 76), "the *cités* in the working-class suburbs, where it is not uncommon to find more than sixty different origins and nationalities, are a reflection of postcoloniality in France." French rap contributes to describe the specific experiences of belonging to a minority group in a society that proclaims a republican ideal while many members of minority groups do not recognize themselves in it, given the discriminations they daily experience.

These developments regarding "racialization processes transversal to French society" allow us to analyze "how rap music in general, and some rap artists in particular, voluntarily or not, question the social relations of race" (Hammou 2018: 34). For example, while the French intellectual world "is dominated by color-blindness, at least when it comes to analyzing French society" (Naudier and Soriano 2010: 195), some public affairs related to the reaction of public authorities to rap lyrics denouncing police brutality and racism could highlight a "racist definition of national identity" in arguments used to defend the state and the police: "to criticize France or French institutions is to criticize the French people. To criticize the French people is to be racist. The major premise of this syllogism, which is often overlooked, is racist: the French people are a homogeneous ethnic group defined by their whiteness." This is the core of the far-right's political agenda (Jamin 2015), which has been much more widely "present in the political imagination and public debate since the mid-2000s. It explains a large part of the form

taken by public denunciations of rappers and rap songs" (Hammou 2018: 35).[58] Indeed, French rap appears as "a setting for explicit discussion of racial stereotypes" in which some assertions are part of a "minority universalism" (Hammou 2013: 8).

Relating this to the elaboration and implementation of several public policies like those of integration, fight against discriminations, equal opportunities and diversity, Poiret (2011: 124) underlines that "ethnicization and racialization combine with reaffirmations of the republican principle of willful color-blindness to constitute forms of minorization available, simultaneously or successively, to guide and/or justify specific forms of treatment of minority individuals and groups." This would further underline "the evolution of political reference frames in France since the 2000s, raising the hypothesis of a seesaw between ethnicization and racization of populations designated as 'black', reflecting an evolution in the way they are treated" (ibid.: 123). Actually, as in soccer or basketball, "hip hop culture [has been] the object of political instrumentalization by public authorities, targeting ethnic minorities in poor neighborhoods" since the 1980s:

> Through subsidies to equip small music studios or produce albums, the cultural policy of municipalities in working-class suburbs blends with that of social control: 'social peace' is notably bought at this price. Just as taggers and graffiti artists teach youngsters in working-class neighborhoods the rudiments of visual expression using spray cans, rappers are tasked with teaching them how to write, a trend encouraged by local councilors. Some observers point to sincere institutional recognition, while others speak of opportunistic recuperation, or even condescending postcolonial paternalism towards the artistic-cultural movement (Béru 2009: 76– 77).

These thoughts about racialized identities in the context of French rap music lead us now to speak about Francophone rap music with the help of empirical analysis backed by a methodological approach and tools. Before doing so, it is necessary to contextualize contemporary forms of resistance to racism in Belgium that have gained visibility in public debate in recent years. Martiniello (2018: 1159) highlights the "slow emergence of a 'post-racial' generation" in the Belgian urban cities of Brussels and Liège with empirical work based notably on hip hop arts and culture practices:

[58] For instance, in a song by Stomy Bugsy featuring several rappers released in 2007, called "*Sois hardcore (remix)*" ["Be Hardcore (Remix)"], the rapper Alpha 5.20, co-founder of the French collective and label Ghetto Fabulous Gang, says: "The majors are afraid of me I've given them amnesia/ Me, I raped their land robbed their stores," while Lino, iconic rapper from the duo Arsenïk (with his brother Calbo) says at the end of the song: "We'll never be integrated with our *boubous* [large traditional dress worn in many West African countries] and our *wesh wesh* [argotic French for "hi"]."

> In our times, undoubtedly characterized by a persistence of racism, social and ethnic polarization and fragmentation and the rise of economic inequalities, cities and their inhabitants are divided […] Discourses about multiculturalism and interculturalism have become largely inaudible to the general public. I claim here that specifically in that very tense context, it is important to document the existence of this 'post-racial' trend which is both a response to racism and to traditional forms of interculturalism and multiculturalism.

If such an argument would be not easily accepted, the aim of the empirical analysis below is to explain how the politics of Francophone Belgian rap music would question the social relations of race in Belgium, Europe, and worldwide, through the experience of postcoloniality fed by hip hop. Before addressing the methodological considerations that structure the empirical analysis, I present now the main hypothesis of the research.

Section 4
Hypothesis

While racism can no longer be ignored in contemporary societies, hip hop has always developed and spread among a racialized framework and is an interesting example of the relationship between politics, popular culture, and artistic practices in a postmaterialist context. I consider the broad category of "black music" as "various musical styles created by people who have faced and fought against racism at different times and locations." Therefore, when the music genres created in such racialized cultural settings have spread all over the world, "they have often been embraced as signifiers of anti-racism and resistance to oppression […] and even when their political dimensions are not emphasized or they have been transformed and reinterpreted in their new locations, as genres, they are known to be rooted in particular political fields" (Rastas and Seye 2019: 592–593). Hip hop appears to be serving as a means of resistance by providing a platform for marginalized voices to be heard. The genre has a long history of challenging oppressive systems and advocating for equality with artists using their music to comment on and confront racism, police brutality, and other forms of social injustice, inspiring listeners to act in various ways. Through their music, hip hop artists bring attention to the lived realities of marginalized communities, highlighting their struggles and calling for social change (Haupt and Rollefson 2021): "rap is shaped not only by the global hip-hop culture but also by local languages and cultures, as well as local expressions of racism and anti-racism" (Rastas and Seye 2019: 596).

The political-historical contextualization of colonialism and racism in Belgium helps to highlight that "[i]f the subalternization of populations still considered 'backwards' persists, then colonial prejudice has not vanished, nor has the colonial structure founded on the basis of the racialization of minorities" (Boulbina 2018: n.p.). Considering that hip hop can challenge colonial structures (Da Sylva 2019), with the African American experience of "double consciousness" crystallizing "the particularized American form of global postcoloniality's contradictions and asymmetries" (Rollefson 2017: 4), I propose the following first hypothesis: The particular manifestation of America's postcolonial condition in hip hop has allowed diverse populations and minority groups around the world, experiencing the same dynamics and practices of alienation, oppression, and exclusion, to use hip hop arts and culture as political and commercial expressions for denunciation, protest, and emancipation regarding race relations. This can be observed in Francophone Belgian rap music.

Assuming that the political implications of hip hop could not be properly questioned until I identified and qualified the process I believe to be at its origin, I have tried to explain how the African American experiences have "created a space in which to imagine global solidarity among diverse populations" (Rollefson 2017: 4), leading to a kind of third space in which majority and minority groups may create a dialogue about racism and racialization. Therefore, I think this propensity of hip hop to formulate critical sociopolitical analyses formulated and articulated around a plurality of discursive registers, all deriving from the perception of a common symbolic cultural and political heritage, is the ground from which emerges a political dimension that I would qualify as "initial," and that would explain the common perception of hip hop as a somehow political thing. Briefly, the history of hip hop would explain the ontological political feature that some people want it to carry, forgetting that it is the specific experience of certain minority groups that it is at stake and, consequently, that such experiences and social interactions cannot be reduced to any kind of essentialization.

This initial political dimension of hip hop would explain its integration to global culture and is at the basis of its potential political uses and aspects. More precisely, this transmission would be achieved through a process of glocalization of its cultural and aesthetic features, starting from the "Black Atlantic" to the globalized world: "Rap music is usually associated with low status. In the US, African Americans and 'blackness' have played a crucial role in asserting US rap authenticity, while in several European countries, migrant groups have been decisive for its local appropriation" (Hammou 2016: 70). The globalization of hip hop through "blackness"

appropriation would have then "transformed the image of negritude, thus becoming an emblem of Afro-American modernity, emancipation and material wealth" (Djerrahian 2010: 19).

It would be very difficult to consider "a neat separation of hip-hop on the one hand and its commodification on the other" (Ochmann 2013: 441). Indeed, I think that "[c]ommodification is the very condition for the birth and life of most contemporary cultural forms of popular culture" and that "the usual devaluation of commercial success in art worlds does not pertain to commodification as such, but rather to the various ways a cultural form may be commodified" (Hammou 2016: 68–69). In hip hop, "[s]uspicions regarding artistic authenticity are animated by a belief that 'real' art cannot exist in the capitalist marketplace" (Hill, in Ochmann 2013: 428). Researchers show that on the notion of "authenticity" and "street credibility," "what matters is who commodifies" since these two "virtually synonymous" are "an integral part of both the production and commodification of hip-hop in both local and global spheres. In other words, authenticity matters to hip-hop as it does to corporate objectives" (Ochmann 2013: 429) because it can be "mediated everywhere on the continuum between mainstream and underground" (ibid.: 432). These thoughts echo the discussion above about postcoloniality in the market, postcolonial exoticism and (mis)appropriation. Indeed, hip hop, as a commodified regime of othered cultural goods, can show a market recognition of cultural goods functioning as implicit operators of minority. The narrative of resistance becomes a narration established as a marketing strategy.

Francophone Belgian rap offers a relevant doorway to shed light on the works and performances of artists in urban contexts and sociopolitical mobilization, discourses, practices, expression of resistances, and strategies related to the state of racism in the postcolonial Belgian context. More broadly, in the words of Nitzsche (2013: 3), I argue that "hip-hop in Europe is transnational and multidirectional using various (African) American rap and hip-hop traditions as significant sources of inspiration to articulate various political, social and cultural struggles in the European context." The resurgence of the postcolonial debate in Belgium shows how the struggle against racism can be diverse and multiple. Considering the latter as a symbolic system of perception of otherness in which processes of racialization and racization affect both the majority and minority groups, and approaching race with the concepts of coloniality and colonial matrix, I propose that the initial political dimension of hip hop from the (African) American postcolonial experience is the common denominator of the potential political aspects

of rap music expressions about the social construction of race in Francophone Belgian rap music.

Chapter 4
Methodologies

The purpose of this chapter is to further define the object of study by presenting the research design with its methodological approach and tools mobilized for fieldwork. I start by explaining positionality and my insider position in hip hop culture and rap music in Francophone Belgium, before explaining how I delimited my fieldwork and collected the empirical data, as well as the process for analyzing it.

Section 1
Reflexivity from an insider position

As Aron (1963: 22–23) points out when speaking about determination of science, "[t]he scholars are at the same time humans of a particular society, of a given time. The orientation and the style of the researches are marked by the character of the humans and not only of the scholars, because the ones are never rigorously separable from the others." Being personally involved in hip hop for more than 15 years—as musician, composer, mixer, DJ, and event organizer—was a determining element in my choice to work on this topic. My position on hip hop is explicitly not "neutral." In this section, I will discuss how this affects the research.

The first subjectivity regarding the way I framed my research relates to my socially constructed origins. While I knew that I wanted to work within political sociology and hip hop studies, the framing of the general problematic has been a longer process than expected. Inequalities issues have always been the common denominator of the problematics I was trying to frame, until I decided to tackle racism, given its explosive resurgence in the public discourse of Western societies. For as long as I can remember, I have always been sensitive to these issues, and I have worked on them several times during my studies in humanities and in political science (international relations). Being from several East African and Western European ethnicities and a citizen of both Belgium and Rwanda, I could easily live multiculturalism or racism every day in the private and public areas of my home place, the multicultural city of Liège. This has certainly contributed to my interest and desire to work on these issues as "researcher" or "artist," for example, by being involved in the Brussels not-for-profit organization Afropean Project, trying to promote "cultural democracy," social justice, and "decolonized" (international)

relations between Africa and Europe (see Chapter 12), and by conducting other researches on these topics.

In the process of writing my thesis, I became acutely aware that my daily practice of hip hop culture since adolescence had greatly helped me to confront the racism I had seen and experienced. I have always seen hip hop as a kind of homage and ode to multiculturalism and the crossing of borders that divide human beings. Through my various cultural and artistic activities, I have experienced the ability offered by hip hop to bring together diverse people from different backgrounds under a common banner of unity and resistance, at least for a certain period of time and to a certain extent. Nevertheless, hip hop can divide audiences, while also being a vehicle for forms of oppression and discrimination or statements and practices incompatible with respect for human rights. As explained above, I see hip hop as a catalytic mirror of human societies, in both their "positive" and "negative" aspects.

Nevertheless, I do not believe that there is a "purity" or other so-called essential characteristics of "hip hop" and the arts related to it; rather, some histories are made, interpreted, and mobilized by people with multiple and diverse purposes and strategies. Therefore, as I see no purity in hip hop, I do not consider myself a "purist" and I do not try to look for that when conducting social sciences research related to hip hop. Nevertheless, the position of "professional researcher" on hip hop leads me to look for a claim to objectivity. As determination in methodological rigor is a key for claiming objectivity and following the general idea developed in *Shadows in the Field: New perspectives for fieldwork in ethnomusicology* (2008 [1997]), I think that intellectual transparency involves the researcher identifying his/her own presences in the different steps of building the research approach, design, and analysis. It is a matter of being aware of ourselves in the "fields" and "shadows" cast on the people studied (Perullo 2000), even more so when the object of study carries as much subjectivity as an artistic object can and when the researcher is himself a full part of its object with its own subjectivity.

The first facility stems from my active participation in local hip hop culture and rap music, which enables me to quickly assimilate the theoretical knowledge I do not have on the relevant topics. I also think I can quickly apply the information gained from other experiences, whether from a generalization perspective or not. Moreover, this insider position greatly facilitates my access to the research field, since I already know and identify as part of it. In contrast, in terms of difficulties, this position may imply certain obstacles arising from my own activities in local

hip hop, starting from a certain pressure stemming from the desire to produce a scientific work that does not distort the reality of the field on which it is based. More generally, being too close to my field can make it difficult to see all its contours, or at least those that interest me in this research. Finally, to put it simply, I consider both music and research to be fascinating work,[59] but if you do it constantly, without allowing yourself moments of disconnection and rest, it can become exhausting. Therefore, in the case of having an insider position in the field, working and thinking about the same thing all the time can be a dangerous circle or a kind of endless tunnel of utopian perfectionism. This awareness makes it easier to break out of the circle and finalize the work. In my case, stepping out of this circle allowed me to confirm that this research began long before its official start at the end of 2017. I benefit thus from an overabundance of the information necessary to frame the research.

One of the purposes of the following methodological developments is to overcome these difficulties, or to minimize the risk of their occurrence in the field analysis. Anyway, being part of it was more a benefit than a problem and I would be very proud to pay tribute to a determinant part of my youth socialization through this qualitative research work based on political sociology and hip hop knowledge. Participant observation is closely linked to my own life experiences, and it is precisely because I am part of my subject of study that I have been able to access and mobilize certain data in order to analyze it critically and relevantly in relation to the approach I have chosen to develop with a certain concern for originality.

The construction of the approach was thus influenced by this general positionality in relation to the research subject. Firstly, as was the case when writing my master's thesis, this choice of subject is another way for me to make hip hop culture live on by continuing to participate in its promotion in Belgium, while maintaining a certain critical distance necessary for analysis. This explains why I sought to develop a comprehensive approach that could take into account the main historical developments of hip hop culture and rap music in (Francophone) Belgium (the artistic works and events themselves, the cultural policies that mobilize it, the music industry and the art world specific to Francophone Belgian rap) and in which I have been involved as an artist at different levels.

[59] I often explain to relatives that I see the activity of composing an instrumental or a song with a certain "artistic" direction and the activity of writing a research work with a certain "scientific" methodology in relatively similar ways, even though the respective purposes of these exercises are not the same.

Nevertheless, developing the approach took a certain time, as I first explored various potential common threads to bring these three historical frameworks coherently together. Discovering certain works and participating in certain events and activities related to hip hop studies was a decisive factor in this process, as was my integration into the CEDEM research center, which allowed me to work on other research projects dealing with public policies related to multiculturalism and interculturality, postcolonial criticism and decoloniality, and racism and racial discrimination. This is how the evidence became clear to me, and I decided to examine directly the political dimension of Francophone Belgian rap music in relation to issues of contemporary racism. I then incorporated into the construction of my general approach elements related to the racist ideology, certain of its processes and consequences, as well as certain of its particularities in (Francophone) Belgium.

These different stages of thinking and exploration have enabled me to conduct qualitative research that I hope is interesting and original, on a subject that has been relatively underexplored in Belgian academia, in order to present a political history of rap music and hip hop culture in Francophone Belgium, making racism and racial discrimination its central theme. I therefore propose to examine explicitly the political dimension of a globalized cultural and artistic object that has become an industrialized consumer good, using a perspective built around the notion of postcoloniality and starting from an insider position while taking a chronological approach built around three main angles of analysis.

Section 2
Fieldwork framing

Hip hop became one of the most important mediums for political expression accessible to European racialized urban youth (Frisina and Kyeremeh 2022: 2916). If the political uses and dynamics of instrumentalization of art can prove contradictory or ambivalent or be at the origin of such situations (Lafargue de Grangeneuve 2006), it is because each artistic field and discipline responds to its own codes and aesthetics, which implies for the analyst the ability to identify these codes and appropriate them. I believe hip hop "defies monolithic conceptualizations" and its study necessitates avoiding considering it through a single reading grid, as Ochmann (2013: 441) explains: "Discussions have sometimes been unbalanced in depicting hip-hop as reactionary to threats of assimilation, or reducing it to its socio-political dimension as the previously unheard voice of 'the' ghetto. Such general approaches are often

overly simplistic and reductionist in their overemphasis of hip-hop as an ultimately socio-political affair."

Similarly, Béthune (2004: 120) points out that it is "always risky to conflate the person of the MC with the character(s) he or she embodies in the course of his or her performances [and the] events – real or fictional – he or she chronicles." Even though vocal music with text has a "privileged relationship" with politics compared to instrumental music (Moysan 2004: 108), to such an extent that in rap music "everyone tends to consider that its message text is the most important" (Sicre and Monin 2004: 109–110), rap music appears better apprehended as a melting pot of social and cultural practices than as a simple and strict discursive statement (Aterianus-Owanga and Moulard 2016). For example, the practices of sampling or the uses of sound effects and Foley (e.g., gun noises), soundscapes (e.g., wartime, crowds), noises of daily life and any other non-musical sound frequencies (e.g., police sirens, graffiti cans, smartphone notifications) can participate in the political scope of hip hop music.

This leads us to recall "that sonic practice – crafting sounds, listening to sounds, and moving to sounds – is at the core of rap music and hip-hop culture more broadly", as Rollefson (2025: 51) underlines when advocating for accurate connections between "the sonic and the social" when doing hip hop (music) studies. Indeed, the author argues that the analysis of hip hop music should "also tell us why [musical sound] matters" by relating it to social analysis (ibid.: 52). This stance is rooted in a decolonial approach that seeks to establish the academic legitimacy of hip hop music on par with more established, less stigmatized genres. For instance, research works from the field of sound studies can contribute to overcome the dismissal of hip hop and rap music as "non-musical" by helping the development of methodologies emphasizing "the way in which sound is treated as an active process, a way of thinking and being, rather than solely an object of study" (Stoever, in Rollefson 2025: 55). The same applies to "hiphopographic" approaches (i.e., ethnographic musical approaches specific to hip hop), flow studies—which acknowledge the technical musicality of rap performances beyond only lyrical content—and arts practice research. These fields offer new conceptual and analytical possibilities for hip hop studies through more explicit connections between the sonic and the social. While I do not strictly employ these specific methodologies, such thoughts fundamentally shape my general approach and methodology and inform the empirical developments of this research.

Relying on all the previous developments and considering the aesthetic and symbolic ground specific to hip hop, I choose to avoid a presupposing of rigid, fixed, and definitive established categories based on its stylistic registers. Following Diallo (2018: 75) when presenting many examples of rap music works that can highlight "the invalidity of a clear-cut opposition between 'conscious' rap and 'gangsta' rap," I believe that establishing a typology and top-down categories about rap music sub-genres before progressing to fieldwork will bring "the notable risk of being confronted with a set of contradictions whose justification precisely invalidates the initial typology." Therefore, following Keyes (2002: 1), I will simply define rap music "as a musical form that makes use of rhyme, rhythmic speech, and street vernacular, which is recited or loosely chanted over a musical soundtrack." The primary interest of this definition seems to me to lie in its ability to reject some assessments of rap as "essentially the bearer of protest power" (Diallo 2018: 81) while empirical music market analysis shows the contrary: "The majority of rap releases, the most visible and the most listened to, are hardly political or 'conscious'" (Diallo 2018: 79; Carter 2017).

The point is thus to avoid overestimating and extrapolating what I call the initial political dimension of hip hop culture and rap music by considering that the latter would ontologically carry such a dimension and therefore avoid any kind of reification. In other words, I would claim that "[y]ou have to say it again and again: rap, break, or graffiti are not interesting because they come from young people left behind, they're interesting because they're interesting" (Lapiower 1997: 277). Regarding racism, and thus the processes of racialization that constitute the categories in which it intends to evolve, the aim is to reveal the racializing meaning that can be decoded in the language of Francophone Belgian rap (and hip hop) music and culture. Analyzing rap song lyrics as part of a shared cultural whole would then reveal a system for apprehending difference based on racialist categorizations, "a universe of meaning that is that of race" (Guillaumin 2002: 189). With this kind of perspective inspiring me to formulate my approach and my research hypothesis, I can now explain how I delimited my fieldwork and collected the empirical data

Subsection 1: Linguistic-geographical and temporal delimitations for chronological analysis

Since Belgium has three official national languages (Dutch, French, and German)[60] distributed differently across the national territory (generally, Dutch in the north, French in the south, and German in the south-east), the first delimitation of my fieldwork is linguistic. I focus on Francophone Belgium to select musical works and cultural practices in French by Francophone actors. This linguistic criterion implies another related criterion, which is a geographical one. Regarding the administrative division of territories in Belgium and given that in 2021 98% of the Belgian population live in urban centers with more than 1,000 residents,[61] I choose to focus on the cities and urban areas of Brussels and Liège to constitute the main geographical sites of my fieldwork and to begin the selection of my discography corpus. There are several reasons to justify the selection of these two case studies, relating to both the similarities and differences that characterize them. The main reason is that these two cities and their urban areas are the main historical bastions, nets, and cyphers of hip hop in Francophone Belgium and have therefore seen many artists perform and emerge from within them. Nevertheless, while I choose these two areas, I have not excluded from the discography certain musical works produced or located in other Francophone Belgian cities.

In addition to their specific importance for the emergence of hip hop in Belgium, Brussels and Liège share multiculturalism and an industrial history. Considering their respective urban areas, these two sites have similar population numbers. We count around 1,200,000 people for the Brussels-Capital Region comprising 19 autonomous municipalities and 200,000 for the central municipality called Brussels.[62] The city of Liège has a population of approximately 200,000 people while the entire "province of Liège," and its urban areas called "arrondissements," have around 1,100,000 people.[63] In Belgium, the "provinces" are subdivisions of the state, except for Brussels where provincial functions are devolved to the Brussels-Capital Region. The province of Liège comprises four arrondissements—Huy, Liège, Verviers, and Waremme—which are further subdivisions below the provinces. These four arrondissements contain the 84

[60] Approximately 60% of the Belgian population is considered Dutch-speaking, 40% French-speaking, and 1% German-speaking (see *The CIA World Factbook* (2023), "Belgium").

[61] See *Statista* (2023), "Part de la population urbaine dans la population totale en Belgique de 2003 à 2021."

[62] See *IBSA* (2023), "Évolution du nombre d'habitants de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale : 1989-2023 (en nombre de personnes)."

[63] See *Statbel* (2023), "Structure de la population."

municipalities of the province of Liège, each with a population of more than 1,000 people and therefore all classified as urban areas.[64]

On political-institutional structure, an important difference between Brussels and Liège can be highlighted. While the Brussels-Capital Region is a fully federated entity of the Belgian federal state, this is not the case for the city and the province of Liège, which are part of another federated entity called the Walloon Region. Nevertheless, given that Belgian federalism recognizes two overlapping types of federated entities that can exercise competences over the same territory in addition to the Federal Authority (i.e., the "Regions" and the "Communities"), the Brussels-Capital Region and the province of Liège are both part of the same federated entity of "Community" type for the exercise of specific competences, which is nowadays called "the Federation Wallonia-Brussels." Moreover, while in constitutional terms Brussels is bilingual and Liège is located on the Francophone territory, French is the majority language in Brussels from a sociolinguistic standpoint (Janssens 2008: 2). Besides, Brussels is both the capital of the Kingdom of Belgium, the Flemish Region, the Federation Wallonia-Brussels, and the European Union,[65] giving it an international status. Liège does not have such status, but is part of European or more global transnational projects and networks,[66] such as the European Coalition of Cities Against Racism (ECCAR), a network in which three municipalities in the Brussels-Capital Region are also members (Anderlecht, Brussels, and Ixelles).[67] Other differences between these urban areas can be noted such as their proper situation regarding civil society and not-for-profit networks structures, ideological orientation, and bottom-up functioning.[68]

From the first linguistic-geographical delimitation of my fieldwork, a temporal one follows. Considering the historical evolution of the Francophone Belgian rap scene, I begin the data collection in the early 1980s when breakdance began spreading via cable TV, and through a "mimetic instinct, which made that from the first minutes, young people of [Francophone Belgium] saw in it a knowing resemblance" (Lapiower 1997: 12). The arrival of the first movies

[64] See Province de Liège (2023), "84 communes."

[65] Although Brussels is not officially recognized as the capital of the European Union by the laws governing its organization, the presence of many European institutions on the Brussels territory makes it a de facto capital (Van Wynsberghe 2014; *OJEU* 2012).

[66] See City of Liège (2023), "International."

[67] See ECCAR (2022), "Member Cities."

[68] I refer in the following to the city of Brussels and the Liège region when speaking about these two case studies and all their urban areas, and to the city of Liège when speaking about Liège city itself. I specify also when I only speak about the municipality of Brussels and not about the capital city as a whole.

devoted to early New York hip hop culture in the Francophone audiovisual sphere and the broadcasting of the French TV program *H.I.P.H.O.P.* on the channel TF1 during 1984 promoted the growing interest in hip hop that had been emerging in the suburbs of France and Belgium for a year or two. Considering this heritage of European Francophone hip hop, the entry point for my data collection is 1984, allowing me to consider the very early days of hip hop in Francophone Europe; the data collection ends in 2021.[69]

The empirical analysis is then divided into three distinct historical periods, each spanning some 15 years: 1) from the early 1980s to 1992; 2) 1993 to 2007; 3) 2008 to 2021. This chronological analysis allows us to compare these three periods, using the two case studies outlined above. I explain the delimitation of the periods in the empirical analysis.

Subsection 2: Hip hop and rap music in Francophone Belgium from 1984 to 2021

The common historical reading of hip hop is articulated around the idea of the unification of "four elements" (DJing, MCing, dance, and graffiti writing), which is useful to identify what hip hop is and to explain the context of its emergence. However, from its earliest days, hip hop has been undermined by other sectors, practices, and discourses related to hip hop culture and, nowadays, what is sometimes commonly referred to as "urban cultures." Indeed, for examples, DJ Kool Herc (cited in Chang 2005: XI) says: "People talk about the four hip-hop elements […] I think that there are far more than those: the way you walk, the way you talk, the way you look, the way you communicate." Afrika Bambaataa began to argue around the 2000s for the existence of a "fifth element," that of "knowledge." Globally recognized American MC KRS-One argued for the existence of nine elements, including "street knowledge" or "street entrepreneurialism" (see the song "9 Elements", 2003), highlighting how the idea of elements in hip hop offers multiple analytical perspectives regarding various subjects.

Therefore, when considering Francophone Belgian rap music, I focus more specifically on certain hip hop elements in order to better contextualize the analysis and, more importantly, to make it manageable with the temporal and material resources and the constraints inherent to any research project. The history of the emergence of rap music shows how the particular combination of two artistic practices from hip hop culture, MCing and DJing, came to its creation and to its aesthetic codifications. Speaking about hip hop DJing, acceptance of the term

[69] That said, I do include in the study some data pertaining to the period after 2021.

has evolved considerably since the 1970s where it began as the practice of what will be called "turntablism" (i.e., the art of creating music, sound effects, and mixes by using two or more turntables with a DJ mixer), particularly in light of technological advances. Therefore, for the research, this term is sometimes replaced by "beatmaker" (i.e., composer of instrumental music intended for rappers, singers, or non-speech musical soundtrack). The practices of DJing and MCing are thus integrated into the analysis when speaking about rap music.

The data collection incorporates all the visuals (covers, video clips and lives, various photos and illustrations etc.) potentially accompanying rap songs, albums, projects, and other performances and works. Indeed, considering that "[c]urrently, it is difficult to imagine popular music without the visual content that accompanies the sound" (Rastas and Seye 2019: 605), aesthetical dimensions of visual content can thus appear as key elements in understanding political mobilizations in music and in reporting social realities (Martiniello 2017b: 1189). The integration of visual content in the analysis thus allows the collection of data related to artistic and cultural practices linked to other hip hop culture elements such as graffiti writing, dance, fashion, street entrepreneurship, and knowledge. With the help of visual methodologies (Ball and Gilligan 2010), these data are then analyzed in the frame of specific subjects or discourses coming from other empirical data. Other conceptual perspectives and approaches are mobilized in the empirical analysis to deepen it according to the data collected, such as the concepts of "art worlds" (Becker 2010 [1982]) or "street-level bureaucracy" (Lipsky 2010 [1980]).

Finally, this chronological analysis is structured around three main angles relating to the different stages in the evolution of hip hop and rap music in Francophone Belgium. The first angle focuses on the forms of mobilization and artistic expression dealing with racism and related issues. The second concerns the responses of certain cultural public policies to the emergence and development of hip hop, as well as the relationship between artists and the institutions and actors involved in these public policies. The third angle of analysis concerns the state of professionalization and commodification of rap music in Francophone Belgium.

Subsection 3: Three general types of empirical data

The previous methodological developments allow me to present the three types of qualitative data mobilized for the research and constituting the fieldwork corpus: (1) in-depth interviews (semi-structured), informal conversations, and observations; (2) corpus of songs and visual

content; (3) archive material. The end of the subsection explains the criteria for selecting empirical material and the general process that led to its final structure.

In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer draws up an evolving interview grid organized according to themes and sub-themes, while leaving the interviewee some room for maneuver. Questions are not asked sequentially or systematically. The semi-structured interview is thus conducted in the manner of a free conversation, allowing for greater trust and freedom of expression. Two interview grids were drawn up based on the initial problematic and the general analytical framework of the research. One was designed for a profile of people involved in the implementation of cultural policies aimed exclusively or partially at young people, while the other was designed for a profile of rap artists. The establishment of these two profiles of actors is therefore one of the selection criteria specific to the panel of interviewees, along with a certain diversification of activities and projects between Brussels and Liège based on the sub cases-study and the general selection criteria (see below). Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted as part of the research, 18 of which are included in the analysis. Of these, five people had a "dual" profile, working both as artists in rap music and as professionals in the implementation of youth cultural policies.

Interview questions focused on the backgrounds of the artists/agents interviewed, the artists' "definition" of hip hop and rap, and the agents' interest in using it for public action. Other questions dealt with racism in Francophone Belgium, the possible connections between "rap and hip hop" and "racism," and the evolution of recognition of hip hop in Francophone Belgium, as well as its commodification. Certain interviews focused more specifically on the artistic and cultural projects presented in the analysis. These interviews were mobilized in all three periods identified in the analysis, and some in several of them. Cross-referenced with the other data collected, it enables us to confirm initial postulates and exploratory analysis, deepen certain elements of the analysis, and pursue its chronological development.

From my insider position, the experience of over 15 years in local hip hop in Liège, including seven years simultaneous to the completion of the doctoral program and thesis writing, is thus a complete participation particularly useful for the research. While, as part of the data collection process, I made several observations based on the general framework of analysis and by

establishing an upstream protocol inspired by the interview grids,[70] I benefit from countless observations of all kinds and informal conversations on various subjects related to hip hop culture and rap music. I also benefit from a professional experience of almost a year as an agent of the implementation of the youth cultural policy in Francophone Belgium at the Youth Centers Federation (based in Liège) and of two years as member (one of these as administrator) of a not-for-profit Brussels organization promoting cultural democracy and fighting inequalities, called Afropean Project.

The principal methodological tool for data collection is a cross-sectional content analysis of rap lyrics based on a sample of 86 songs and 30 visual elements.[71] In order to take into account the musical diversity of current rap music and thus avoid favoring one sub-genre that would be considered more "political" than another, I believe that "considering rap as a mode of expression that is a vector for several types of discourse (socially engaged, gangsta, religious, etc.) makes it possible to account for the plurality of thematic and stylistic registers that can be explored by a single concept, and thus to maintain a certain coherence in the analysis" (Diallo 2018: 76). While the selection of songs from the period 1989 to 2003 was based on an almost exhaustive process of listening to tracks published in Brussels and Liège in physical format (an important part of it being available on the Internet today), the rest of the chronological analysis was based on a more selective listening, targeting artists and/or projects known for their expressions related to racism and racial discrimination. The last period of analysis focused more on expressions linked to the Belgian postcolonial context by artists with a certain level of integration in the music industry, with a few exceptions. With the democratization of the Internet and its tools of promotion and dissemination, it is not possible to pretend to an almost exhaustive listening of songs available on a multitude of formats within the framework of this research. Therefore, the sample of songs and visual content does not claim to be representative of Francophone Belgian rap music in Brussels and Liège, nor does it claim to have been able to identify all the expressions of this music directed against racism up to 2021.

The constitution of the discographical corpus raises then the question of the interpretation of the material with cross-sectional content analysis. I firstly frame the analysis by considering "the song as a text expressing ideas without prejudging the reception or the performance."

[70] Three passive observations made in this framework are used in the analysis.

[71] Other songs are mentioned in the analysis in order to better contextualize or deepen it. This more general corpus is indicated as "various" in the research discography.

Indeed, in addition to minimizing subjectivity, this analytical approach seems particularly well-suited to rap since "it is limited to the explicit intentionality of the text" (Clément 2015: 128). Nevertheless, considering firstly the selected songs as texts to be analyzed does not imply the exclusion of developments helping the interpretation of the material about how the instrumental music is harmonized with the lyrics.[72] Similarly, although I did not establish an initial typology of rap music works for the constitution of the corpus, I mobilize considerations about different stylistic registers of rap that are investigated in the literature. Visual content analysis also helps with the interpretation of the selected material.

I interpreted the content mainly based on the developments formulated in the theoretical framework, taking care to establish relevant connections between the objects "hip hop arts and culture" and "racism in Francophone Belgium." My insider position and general knowledge of global hip hop culture also helped in the interpretation of references made by the artists. As for the less explicit references and poetic constructions, consultation of various sources of information helped to formulate their interpretations.[73] Establishing these initial connections enabled me to identify related sub-themes according to the three chosen angles of analysis.[74] The most salient sub-themes were then selected to structure the presentation of the data and their analysis for the songs and visual content corpus. More generally, various literatures and documentation helped the interpretation of the material and the framing of the content analysis. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of the analysis has enriched its content by establishing a relationship of confirmation and/or nuance through the dialogue of different types of data.

For ease of reading, I have translated all the French lyrics into English. The main principle behind these translations is to remain as faithful as possible to the words chosen by the artists, while ensuring that the meaning remains the same in English. Obviously, it is not possible to claim a "unified system for describing all the prosodic, musical and stylistic characteristics of

[72] The information about song metadata and "IDs" was collected on platforms such as Discogs, Genius, Spotify, and YouTube.

[73] Platforms such as Genius ("the world's biggest collection of song lyrics and musical knowledge"), or Urban Dictionary (an online dictionary of "urban" slang and vocabulary, with definitions provided by registered users) were consulted for the commentary options they propose to users and contributors. When consulted, comments on these platforms were integrated into the cross-sectional content analysis to ensure their possible relevance for the material interpretation work. YouTube, social media, blogs and Internet archives, and public interviews were also consulted as "archive material" (see below).

[74] During exploratory work, I made a few analysis sheets regarding certain songs included in the corpus. Cross-referenced with the initial information and analytical developments about the emergence of hip hop and rap music in Francophone Belgium, this tool enabled an initial identification of relevant sub-themes for the general analysis.

rap" (Carinos and Hammou 2020: 13). When transcribing rapped lyrics, the aim is to find a balance between a versified poetry-style transcription and a non-existent or minimal punctuation-style transcription, in an attempt to reproduce textually the important elements of the rappers' flow. In the context of this research, I chose to place the transcription of the lyrics in a median position between the two perspectives, using punctuation when I considered it necessary for a better understanding of the meaning of the line and/or to better convey the interpretation of the rappers.[75]

Additionally, my translations of lyrics, interview excerpts, documentation, and archival material are part of a process that cannot claim to be entirely objective, as my positionality and cultural and social affiliations influence my interpretations, as well as my choice of words to use or omit, and the way I formulate the ideas, expressions, and worldviews that are the subject of analysis. This implies considering the act of translating from French to English specific to this research as part of a process that is not neutral and purely linguistic, but that, instead, involves elements that influence the interpretation and meaning derived from my translations. This politics of translation (Spivak 1993) reflects my own interpretation and shows that the process of translation has a certain political significance. Therefore, interpretation itself is not necessarily stable but can evolve depending on the context, particularly in the case of a cultural ensemble such as hip hop and rap music, where the figure of double entendre is an integral part of the aesthetic and cultural codes. More generally, the choice of writing this manuscript in English rather than French—even though French is my mother tongue, my everyday language, and the primary language used at the University of Liège—can be understood by my desire to participate in the promotion of Belgian hip hop culture and global hip hop studies, and thus to write this research in the most widely spoken language.

To appreciate the politics of translation specific to my research, I have compiled in the appendices (section 1) all of the French lyrics from the main discography corpus, classified alphabetically by song title in French. Sometimes after the original French version, English translations are included, to lighten the main manuscript. A translation lexicon is available in the appendices (section 2) to explain my translation choices for certain terms based on the context in which they are used. The terms selected for the translation lexicon are marked with

[75] Each slash ("/") represents either the beginning of a musical bar, or the beginning or continuation of a sentence.

an asterisk (*)[76] in the following analysis section. Certain terms that have not been translated per se but have been taken directly from the original French text are indexed in the lexicon, as well as certain Anglicisms specific to hip hop and rap culture, which may reflect its localization in Francophone Belgium. Finally, the indications between "[]" or "()" and preceded by "i.e." provide additional contextualization and/or interpretation elements of the selected lyrics.

Three types of data considered as "archives" are used in the research: various written documentation, filmed interviews and other audio/video documentary material, and legal documentation. The consultation and the data collection from various written documentation have been crucial for the interpretation of the material with cross-sectional analysis. All types of documentation were consulted: newspaper articles, blogs and websites, reports, studies, internal or public documentation from regional, national or international organizations. These documents could be identified and consulted by several means, the main one being the consultation of various Internet databases using specific keywords targeting general or specific songs, artists, projects.[77] Where documents were not directly accessible, I was able to contact libraries or archive centers to consult them. I also retrieved internal information documents when I was working at the Youth Centers Federation in Francophone Belgium and visited the documentation center of Lezarts Urbains (see below) and the resource center of the Flow, a "Euroregional Center for Urban Cultures" located in the city of Lille (in France, near Belgium) to consult other documents.

After consulting these documents, I was able to identify and integrate at least nine sub-cases relating to different projects and not-for-profit organizations integrating hip hop culture and rap music in Brussels and Liège, spread over the three analysis periods.[78] The analysis is also enriched by data from other projects, integrated on a more selective basis.

The second type of archive material mobilized in the research is filmed interviews and other audio/video documentary material, including a few live performances and movies. Finally,

[76] These terms are then listed alphabetically by their English translation in the lexicon (or by their French formulation for the not-translated terms).

[77] The requests were made using Google with a private browser, to avoid potential bias due to its search algorithm.

[78] Two sub-case studies for 1984–1992 (the Rap Against Drugs and the Rap Side Stories festivals); four for 1993–2007 (the compilation *Fidèles au vinyl*, the project "Musical Action Service," and the not-for-profit organizations Afrokore and Lezarts Urbains); three for 2008–2021 (the not-for-profit organization Nectar and two projects related to the Youth Centers Federation in Francophone Belgium in which I directly participated).

some legal documents from various sources are mobilized to better contextualize and deepen the transversal analysis.

Since the mid-1980s, documentation on the subject has begun to be produced by organizations in the cultural policy sector. In addition, since the early 2000s and the democratization of the Internet, but especially since the 2010s, media and public or private organizations have increasingly contributed to the enrichment of this documentation. As well as having access to this information, which was made easier by my positionality, it was necessary to carry out a first review of its qualitative potential in relation to the general research question and the study approach chosen. This initial exploration of the information gathered from the archival material helped to identify and confirm the three angles of analysis chosen as historical frameworks for the development of Francophone rap music. The definitive choice of these angles of analysis therefore constituted a criterion for selecting and processing data from the empirical material, whether for establishing the panel of interviewees or for selecting the songs and lyrics included in the main discographical corpus. Consulting the archives, initial interviews and informal conversations with people with "dual" profiles and my own participatory experience enabled me to reduce the risk of data saturation by avoiding conducting interviews that would have potentially led to repetition of information already available. The risk of data saturation was thus considered in the final establishment of the empirical material.

Finally, I chose to structure the cross-sectional content analysis by starting with the corpus of songs and visual content, to which the data from my own interviews and those already available in the selected documentation were articulated, as well as data relating to sub-case studies identified through consultation of archives and participant experience. These sub-case studies were selected using the same criteria as for the rest of the empirical corpus and were themselves used to select the definitive panel of interviewees. The main criteria for selecting the empirical material are as follows: relevance and qualitative potential in relation to the research problem and question, and the chosen approach; the learnings from my participant experience and positionality in relation to the subject; and the question of saturation of empirical data in relation to the objective and context of the research.

Part 2

Chronological empirical analysis

Empirical analysis: 1984-1992

To analyze the emergence of hip hop in Francophone Belgium, I propose firstly to look back at its diffusion through television and cinema in the early 1980s, starting with a French TV show called *H.I.P.H.O.P*. This provides explanations about the creation of various groups of amateur artists around the artistic disciplines of hip hop, prior to the creation of the Universal Zulu Nation Belgian Chapter in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Several groups and crews crystallize this emergence in Brussels, such as BRC, RAB, and Benny B. Two major artworks of Francophone Belgian rap music were produced in 1990: BRC's compilation *Stop the Violence*, and the first commercial hit song in Francophone and Belgian rap music, "*Vous êtes fous!*" ["You Are Crazy!"] by Benny B.[79] The first was considered to represent a more "underground" side, while the second was considered more "commercial." Hip hop also attracted actors in the implementation of cultural policies aimed at youth in Francophone Belgium, and the first events, actions, and public policy initiatives based on hip hop were organized in this era, the festivals Rap Against Drugs in 1991 and Rap Side Stories in 1992.

[79] A few weeks after the release of this song, the French rapper MC Solaar released "*Bouge de là*" ["Move From There"], a maxi-single considered the first French rap music hit.

Chapter 5

Transatlantic glocalization at the beginning of Francophone rap music from Belgium

Section 1

The 1980s and the first Francophone European Zulus: Mimetic instinct and transatlantic intercultural circulations in France and Belgium

From January to December 1984, the French (nowadays) private TV channel TF1, with Europe's largest audience, broadcast a show focusing on hip hop culture. According to the German-French media Arte, *H.I.P.H.O.P.* was the world's first TV show dedicated solely to hip hop.[80] The French photographer and entrepreneur Sophie Bramly, artistic director of the show and an important figure for the emergence of hip hop in Europe,[81] explained during episode 16 that there was no equivalent to it in the US.[82] Speaking about the French media landscape at the time, the French musician and rapper Oxmo Puccino explains: "Anything that looks like hip hop on TV was unthinkable at the time, unthinkable. So it was a revolutionary, lunar, extra-terrestrial show."[83] Sidney (Patrick Duteil), a multi-skilled French music artist and member of several bands with Haitian origins, hosted the show during its 12 months on air.

From 1981, Sidney was the presenter and DJ of a Radio 7 show dedicated to black music. He discovered the hip hop movement and its cultural framing with the release of *Planet Rock*, a famous maxi-single by Afrika Bambaataa and the Universal Zulu Nation (*Sneakers Culture*, n. d.). According to Sylvain Bertot, this song crystallized a brief period in early 1980s New York (downtown Manhattan) where "black rap artists from Harlem and the Bronx" met the "post-punk and post-disco white bohemian New York." This momentary exit from the ghetto led certain hip hop artists to try the musical trend of the moment, integrating electronic sounds into musical productions taken from specific hardware, like the famous drum machine Roland TR-808 released in 1980 (Bertot 2012: 18, 19). *Planet Rock* appears then as a marker of

[80] See *ARTE* (2021), "La vraie histoire de H.I.P. H.O.P."

[81] "All the disciplines of hip hop, graffiti, music and dance, serve to make the ugly beautiful, to find its place in the desert: this vitality, this kind of magic potion, I allowed myself to absorb it with them." This statement captures the mind of S. Bramly when she was in New York from 1982–1984 shooting the hip hop arts and culture blooming. After *H.I.P. H.O.P.*, she became producer-host in London of *Yo!*, the first rap show sponsored by MTV Europe, which became *Yo! MTV Raps* for the US (Grelard 2022).

[82] See *ARTE* (2021), "Planète Rock : Mixtapes from New York | H.I.P. H.O.P. #5" (starting from 1:20).

[83] See *ARTE* (2021), "Comment le rap est arrivé à la télévision française | H.I.P. H.O.P. #1" (starting from 0:24).

important first mutations of hip hop where it mixed with a European electronic music trend tinged with Afro-futurism in the US (Bertot 2012: 88). While this period of 80s "electro funk" or "electro rap" embodied by Afrika Bambaataa was relatively short, it initiated the first combination of genres between emerging recorded rap music and electronic music and showed examples of partnerships between black hip hop artists and white rock and post-punk or electronic music artists.[84]

By a combination of circumstances, Afrika Bambaataa came to meet Sidney at his show on Radio 7 in 1982 and appeared on *H.I.P.H.O.P.* in 1984 on episode 12. Sidney explains: "And from there we got together, we had the same values and more or less the same background, he made me the first Zulu in France in 1982; I joined the International [Universal] Zulu Nation at that time!" He continues: "At the same time, TF1, which wanted to develop new TV shows, offered me the Sunday afternoon slot to introduce hip hop. I was really excited, but I didn't have any reference to an existing show because it was a world premiere, so I called the Americans, Africa [sic] Bambaataa, who told me to go ahead and do it... 'We don't have any shows about hip hop culture, you'll be the first to do it and represent hip hop culture in the world...'" (in *Sneakers Culture*, n. d.). As Hammou (2014: 29–30) points out, the audience for the program was "considerable" and it "popularizes new forms of dance and new sounds that can be described, in the continuity of Afrika Bambaataa's *Planet Rock*, as electro-funk. From 1984, an abundant production of 45 rpm record is born, which adapts in France the electro-funk and often adopts a rapped interpretation." In addition to a thematic solely dedicated to the hip hop movement, what made *H.I.P.H.O.P.* revolutionary was the presenter being a black man: "All of a sudden, it was like a freak show that everyone was talking about, like 'a black guy on TV'" (Bramly, in Hammou 2014: 29). The arts and culture journalist Juan Massenya underlines Sidney's impact in France:

> There are two great pillars of youth culture from the black community, it's Michael Jackson, who radiates the planet with Billie Jean and suddenly everyone walks like in Billie Jean and puts on white socks and does the same steps and there's Sidney. It's not Prince, it's really Michael and Sidney, with *H.I.P.H.O.P.* who makes us discover Afrika Bambaataa.[85]

[84] The classic album *Electro Cypher* produced by the French rapper Akhenaton in 2000 is a good example of electronic hip hop music. A more recent example of such music can be found in "Purple Lamborghini" (2017) featuring Skrillex, the famous electronic music DJ, and Rick Ross, the famous former "King of Miami" and the "Southside" of the US rap world.

[85] See *ARTE* (2021), "Comment le rap est arrivé à la télévision française | H.I.P. H.O.P. #1" (starting from 5:34).

Sidney is thus considered a "pioneer in the diffusion of Black Music in France" (*Slate* 2022). The French rapper and singer Soprano talks about how he heard of hip hop when he was young during the *H.I.P.H.O.P.* era: "It comes from New York but you can hear it here, you think: 'Yeah you know when you go to the US, there are a lot of Blacks there, they mix with Latinos, with Italians, a lot of different origins, white people really! And they do something called hip hop'."[86] When I conducted a semi-structured interview with Egocentrik, a French rapper of Haitian origins who lives in Francophone Belgium (in the city of Huy in the province of Liège), he explained that he discovered hip hop in his early youth thanks to *H.I.P.H.O.P.*:

> I've always held on this music, hip hop, writing lyrics, themes, projects with friends, that's how it started […] Yes, before I started writing I already knew hip hop since *H.I.P.H.O.P.*, Sidney's show on TF1. Later I discovered [French] groups like *Les Sages Poètes de la rue* [The Wise Poets of the Street] (Egocentrik 2021: n.p.).

Hammou (2014: 18) underlines the "ambivalent relationship" between Afro-American musics and the French record industry of the 1980s. Indeed, while famous French music artists like Charles Trenet, Claude François and many others had been inspired by these popular musics coming from America, few records affiliated to the musical genres called "Black Music" (jazz, rhythm and blues, soul, funk etc.) were distributed in France. Record companies seemed to be skeptical about the demand for such music among the French public and the 1960s music trade press expressed "a form of distancing, if not hostility, towards the musical genres associated with the black minority in the United States" (Hammou 2014: 18). According to Vincent Piolet's (2017: 51) analysis of the emergence of French hip hop in the 1980s, the French musical market was "living in autarky, and the comparison with its British neighbor was painful" when thinking about the presence of rock or reggae music in the UK. This leads one to think that the "color line" dividing American music based on the ethnicity of musicians ("black" or "white") was reproduced in France (Hammou 2014: 18).

From the second half of the 1970s, the musical genre called "disco" exploded in France and Belgium. A "breach" opens then for the entry of rapped prosodies in this context (Hammou 2014: 18). Indeed, in 1979, the record company Vogue and its Belgian branch (Vogue Belgique) distributed "Rapper's Delight" (Servin 2010: 72). The song is articulated around a sample from the famous disco-funk song "Good Times" by Chic and the bass line of "Rapper's Delight"

[86] See *ARTE* (2021), "Sidney made in France | H.I.P. H.O.P. #2" (starting from 5:08).

accentuates the funk timbre of the sample. The song being built on the codes of disco-funk, Vogue could thus include it in its disco catalogue. “But the originality of the track […] lies especially in the way the interpreters pronounce their words: neither spoken nor sung, they show a new prosody” (Hammou 2014: 19). In a context in which disco music is better invested in by French musicians and producers than soul or funk music, where English-speaking multinational record companies have secured their presence in the French market, and where the “nightclubs” become a new and fully-fledged hobby for those who can afford it and are allowed to participate, “the first rapped interpretations in France” are popularized, both in English or in French. For 1981, Hammou (2014: 19) counts at least a dozen rapped interpretations released in Canada, France, or Belgium.

The rapped prosody was then known in many Francophone European homes through these songs from the “variety” genre and “[t]he term ‘rap’ was no longer foreign to the housewife.” Nevertheless, “[t]he scansion of text became fashionable without questioning the roots of hip-hop across the Atlantic.” Therefore, “[a]ll that was missing was a hip-hop dressing from the record companies to conquer the young public of the playgrounds always on the lookout for the new fashion style.” Indeed, if some young people who were about to become European hip hop pioneers were already practicing this new music and the acrobatic and choreographic figures that came with it, “[hip-hop] was not identified as such, jazz-funk and electro-funk mixed easily with hip-hop” (Piolet 2017: 53). As Sidney explains: “We were thinking: ‘Here is a new style, it’s funny’. We knew it was rap, but nothing more. It was a style of funk like there are other styles of funk. […] The breaking, the hip-hop arrived after” (cited in Hammou 2014: 26). The TV show *H.I.P.H.O.P.* was greatly important to France recognizing and identifying rap. Indeed, while the programme drives on this understanding of rap related to the first wave of disco-funk records, “it implicitly transforms its meaning for many amateurs by putting it in the larger framework of a hip-hop culture composed of several artistic disciplines. The programme also introduces the existence of the Zulu Nation, an international organization promoting hip-hop culture.” However, the status given to this new youth culture by the program seems tinged with a certain “ambivalence,” between “the description of a multidisciplinary, coherent and durable artistic movement, and that of an exotic fashion” (Hammou 2014: 27).

In Francophone Belgium, where people subscribed to the same TV channels as in France in addition to a very few Francophone Belgian ones, the program’s impact “was considerable” and initiated an “explosion” of the movement (Stiers 2007: 34; in *VHH* 2011). DJ Omix (2021:

n.p.), pioneer of hip hop deejaying in Charleroi, explained to me during a semi-structured interview that he discovered hip hop through dancing and *H.I.P.H.O.P.*:

> I discovered [hip hop] through dancing, I was 12, 13 years old. Even if I never started dancing, I was already intrigued by hip hop culture in general and then there was this show that made history in hip hop that was called *H.I.P.H.O.P.* from Sidney, the first hip hop show on a public channel, let's say.

We must highlight the importance of dancing in the reception of hip hop culture outside the US during the 1980s. Lapiower (1997: 11) underlines that the spread and internationalization of hip hop began with the "innocuous invasion" of breaking on the television screens (1997: 11). Indeed, in addition to *H.I.P.H.O.P.*, several music videos (e.g., "Rapture" by Blondie in 1980, "The Message" by Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five in 1982, "Rockit" by Herbie Hancock, and "Street Dance" by Break Machine in 1983) and movies or documentaries (e.g., *Beat Street*, *Breakin'* (renamed *Break Street 84* for Francophone diffusion), *Flashdance, Wild Style*) contributed towards the spread and glocalization of hip hop in Francophone Europe. In Francophone Europe, the discovery of the dance styles practiced by the b-boys (e.g., popping, locking, breakdancing, smurfing) initiated the first mimetic reflexes of young people from urban areas who started exploring these acrobatic and innovative performances. In France, the careers of artists such as Kool Shen and Joey Starr of the group Suprême NTM or Shurik'n of the group IAM demonstrates the importance of dance in the transmission of the whole hip hop culture. Following Kool Shen explaining that "[t]he real start was this. Music wasn't really our thing. Dancing was our thing," we can assert that it is "dancing that allowed the hip-hop movement to take root in France" (cited in Béthune 2004: 38). The same observation can be made about Francophone Belgian, as explained by actor, director and theater animator Mohammed Ouachen (cited in Stiers 2007: 59) in his 2005 theatrical show about hip hop dance in Belgium: "I remember with my mates, during playtime, we only played mini-football [...] And all of a sudden, in '84, when I was 10, everyone stopped playing mini-football and started breakdancing! So what did I do? I started breakdancing too!"

Francophone Belgium started to experiment the same phenomenon seeing young people from urban areas and, mostly, ethnic minorities and low-income neighborhoods, began to gather in private and public spaces to practice hip hop dancing as if it was a sportive discipline while integrating its related codes. Fourmi, or Phil One (Philippe Fourmarier-Garfinkels), was one of

the first-generation of b-boys in Brussels, since 1983 (Stiers 2007: 56), and co-founded the UZN Belgian Chapter. He explains: "To put it simply, you could say that we were a group of young people who were discovering. And we were not just discovering; we were researching!" (in Stiers 2007: 44). With his friends Danny and Daddy K (Alain Deproost, later a famous Belgian DJ), they created in the early 1980s their dance crew, the Dynamic Three, who used to train at the Koekelberg National Basilica in Brussels because the material constituting its forecourt was ideal for breaking: "Most of the time we chose the dance moves from the TV, on the Sydney [sic] show for example. We thought: 'Well, it's 1 o'clock, we have until 8 o'clock to catch this movement'" (in Lapiower 1997: 13). Indeed, according to Stiers (2007: 46–47), "[i]f the Belgians hadn't had television, nothing would have been the same. Well, we're talking about hip-hop dance when it comes to us..." As one dancer from that era interviewed by Stiers explains: "Before that, the major influence [for the young dancers] was James Brown." In Belgium, as in France, hip hop dance spread in the early 1980s through television, as Belgian dancer Kubilay affirms: "It was really done through television [...] I remember sometimes waiting until five o'clock in the morning for a little ten-minute piece on German channels" (ibid.). As Lapiower (1997: 12–13) says: "It was among these crazy breakers that rap and tag found their first fervent followers. They all started by dancing."

Daddy K discovered hip hop music in 1982 through "Buffalo Gals" by Malcolm McLaren and its video clip with the famous hip hop dancers Rock Steady Crew: "And I stay like that in front of my TV thinking: 'This is what I want to do.' And then there was *H.I.P.H.O.P.*, and every Sunday afternoon we tried to reproduce what we saw in Sidney's show and then as time went by, we understood that it was a culture."[87] During these cyphers, he explains that the Dynamic Three were respected by the other crews because they were "the only three skilled Whites 'on the ground'. We were feared everywhere we went, others said: 'be careful, they are White, but they are killers, they are very strong'. Then others were added, other generations, other nationalities, it was no problem" (in Lapiower 1997: 14). In a video clip available on YouTube, from a November 1989 RTL TVI news report on graffiti writing (see below), Fourmi explains what the hip hop movement from this time could represent for a youngster living in a society with drugs, delinquency, and crime. Claiming that hip hop puts you in "a spirit of peace and goodwill," he goes on to explain "us, we don't care if you're white, if you're black, if you're yellow, what's important is what's in your mind, if you have good things in your mind that's

[87] See *Clique TV* (2022), "Daddy K : l'origine belge du rap français – Clique Get Busy" (starting from 2:09).

what matters."[88] Defi J, a Belgian hip hop pioneer who was involved in the foundation of the UZN Belgian Chapter, affirmed in a 1994 interview that hip hop is multicultural. Indeed, after saying that "The Message" "referred to the problems that we, the immigrants, were experiencing here," he explains that there are many immigrants in the movement: "Arabs, many Blacks, Whites too. It is a multicultural movement. But it was Hip Hop that interested us most, *Black* [in English in the original quote], White or *Beur* [i.e., French slang for Arab people],* you were above all a B-boy. And, at the beginning, as a B-boy, we were frowned upon." He continues:

> You were [perceived as] a bad boy, sneakers, big laces... Since then, rap music has almost become a way of life and we've made money from it, but at the time it was frowned upon. I was even told that I had disowned my race because I was seen with White and Black people. I evolve with my mind and my way of life. And I think that I have moved for 'those of my race' as they say. Anyway, I don't like the word race, I'm an open-minded person. There are B boys who are in clans influenced by films they have seen... It's ridiculous and it's not the spirit of hip hop. You don't evolve without looking elsewhere, without accepting and trying to understand, these people are stagnating in ignorance.

Defi J returns then to the multicultural aspect of the movement, emphasizing that it has enabled him to make certain encounters that would not otherwise have been possible and that "this is positive" (in Lapiower 1997: 53–54). Similar observations were made by DJ Omix during our semi-structured interview. Indeed, after noticing that the famous electronic music DJ David Guetta performed on *H.I.P.H.O.P*. (and then released his first vinyl disc in 1990, called "Nation Rap" featuring Sidney (*Sneakers Culture*, n. d.; *Ravelations* 2014)), DJ Omix explains that in his view hip hop can "open up perspectives": "At the beginning, hip hop is a closed thing where people federate because it's frowned upon, you know, at the beginning, acceptance is not very strong for hip hop. It's really in the late 80s, early 90s, I think there was an opening that took shape and we infiltrated." He continues:

> I think the credit goes to those people who persevered despite the adversity of the time, you know. Because it was adversity when you had to explain to your parents that your thing was music, deejaying, rap, all that culture, you know, very few parents were understanding about that, you know, because they didn't understand that behind it there was a whole culture and also a way of life (DJ Omix 2021: n.p.).

[88] See "Back to the roots of Belgian RAP with BRC..." (n. d.) (starting from 1:20).

Later in the interview, DJ Omix raised the issue of racism when I asked him a question in relation to the evolution of hip hop and the new recognition it acquired globally:

> Then there's the whole federating side, when we talk about racism, hip hop also allows you not to be racist because you overcome this problem of fear of the unknown, you know. You go towards people you wouldn't necessarily have gone towards if you hadn't been in hip hop, that's what I mean. Because you have preconceived ideas, like I said, fear of the unknown, but also maybe because of your education. Maybe in your family you have people who are rather... not racist but who are into 'be careful, we don't know what can happen,' you know, that kind of thing. Once you're inside [hip hop] and you get to know people, you realize that they're like you and that makes you understand that there's nothing to be afraid of in fact. And so that's why I say that hip hop, for racism, I think it's a good thing, it can really open the brain of some people and opening perspectives is not opening the skull, I think there's a sentence that says that, opening your field of vision is not fracturing your skull (DJ Omix 2021: n.p.).

When I asked him: "When you hear the words hip hop, rap and racism, are there any links that come directly to mind?", he confirmed: "Yes, that's what I was saying, I think that rap and hip hop culture federate people who might not have had the opportunity to federate if hip hop hadn't existed, and you can't imagine how important that actually is." Rachid Esserhane, hip hop dancer from the first generation in Charleroi and co-founder of the dance school *Temps Danses Urbaines* with Mona-Lisa Maglio in Charleroi, echoed these thoughts during our semi-structured interview when I asked him his view on recent events related to racism in relation with his understanding of hip hop:

> What I see is that... it's fear, racism is fear of the other […]. [Hip hop culture] it's a tool because it was born in this context, it was born at a time when gangs that were beating each other up, between communities […] the communities didn't mix even in terms of territory, the northern neighborhoods didn't go to the southern neighborhoods, it's a form of racism. So it was born in the United States, especially, the police blunders, I think they date back to a very, very, very long time ago, but now the social networks are bringing it up to date and it's getting bigger. What's happening in the world right now at the second we know it! And the tool, yes, it's the exchange, the creatsharing, and from the moment you make a conscious text, for example, and the person is receptive, it's going to break down all the clichés, it's going to make them think, and then something is put in place at the relational level, a cliché is broken down, and this weakens racism, it weakens the fear (Esserhane 2021: n.p.).

John, a graffiti writer from the first generation and working on hip-hop-related projects at For'J, a Youth Centers Federation (see below) in Charleroi, went along these lines when we were talking about cultural and ethnic-related "tensions" in the contemporary US during a semi-structured interview: "And the good thing is that in hip hop, there's not all this tension. You

look at rap groups and you have all the nationalities. I think that in hip hop there is something that unites on the same theme, which is basically Afrika Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation" (John/For'J 2021: n.p.).

Speaking about rap music in relation to these developments, DJ Omix underlines:

> You see, when you are interested in rap and in writing more specifically, you realize that there are stories in these songs and these stories you can appropriate them or not but in any case you can identify with some of them and that's important because it allows you to escape and that's what we all need in the world we live in today if we don't have a minimum of that it can turn out badly in fact. We know that culture has the ability to bring us together and to unite people (DJ Omix 2021: n.p.).

The beginning of the 1980s was thus the time when the hip hop movement started to emerge, spread, and unite in Belgium through the cultural immersion and involvement it required, starting from its capital city: "In Brussels, we were hooked, in Molenbeek, Laeken, Schaerbeek..." (Stiers 2007: 43), Forest or Saint-Josse (Lapiower 1997: 17). During a semi-structured interview with Lapiower in 2017, he explained that "the emergence is essentially in Brussels in fact and not even everywhere in Brussels, so it's quite geographically targeted for sociological reasons. Thus, hip hop really took root at the beginning in the popular [low-income] neighbourhoods of the city where there was a lot of immigration." He then came back on some "objective facts" about this emergence specifically in these neighborhoods, such as the mandate of Roger Nols, mayor of Schaerbeek from 1970–1989. Nols was known for his proximity to racist ideas and joined the extreme-right Francophone political party *Front National* (nowadays *Agir*) in 1995. During his mandate in Schaerbeek, he took a series of explicit discriminatory measures and xenophobic stances, like prohibiting inscriptions in public spaces in languages other than French or Dutch, banning Muslim religion classes in municipal schools, and blocking the registration of foreigners at the municipal administration (*Jewish Museum of Belgium* 2018: 28): "There was a rather contemptuous attitude in certain neighbourhoods, a rather ambiguous attitude on the part of the police, etc. And that favoured the emergence of hip hop in those neighbourhoods" (Lapiower 2017: n.p.).

The landscape of Belgian hip hop started to take shape through dancing and the creation of dance crews. A first competition was organized in 1983 in the center of Brussels, at the nightclub of the former Théâtre de la Gaîté. Other competitions would be organized in the

following years, some of them involving internationally recognized dancers within the hip hop movement (Stiers 2007: 43–45). Thus, after being transmitted by the audiovisual technologies of the time, hip hop spread in Belgium initially through dance trainings, competitions, and battles often hosted by DJs. Sam Touzani (cited in Lapiower 1997: 17) was one of this first wave of hip hop dancers in Belgium: "Ah yes, there was competition, rivalries, but we were helping each other." Speaking of a hall where many groups came to practice, he continues: "no problem, no fight, nothing. Only dancing, a total success, the boys were not hanging around in the street." Fourmi agrees, recalling the atmosphere as "family-like," while explaining: "if there wasn't some tension, it wasn't hip-hop either" (in Stiers 2007: 52). In Brussels, the hype quickly took hold, hip hop dance spread, and a growing number of groups emerged. Certain public places and areas became hot spots for these new hip hop dancers, like the National Basilica, the sports hall and places in the municipalities of Ganshoren or Schaerbeek, the Galerie Ravenstein, the Palais des Beaux-Arts, the former Galerie de la Monnaie, and the train stations. School buildings may also have been used as training grounds for b-boys since some teachers, and not only those of gymnastics, were impressed by the performances of the dancers and their dedication in the practice of this discipline (Stiers 2007: 60; Quittelier 2015).

At the end of the 1980s, Brussels was the leading place for b-boying in Belgium. The hip hop movement was seemingly not yet really represented in Wallonia (the other part of the Francophone Belgian territory), except in Liège where the first-generation of hip hop artists from this city emerged at this time (Lemaire 2013). For the first time in 1987 and again in 1991, Afrika Bambaataa came to Brussels—an important event for cultural awareness regarding hip hop in Belgium. His arrival in 1987 for a "family ambiance" show was part of his visit to Paris the same year for a few months (Defi J, in Lapiower 1997: 60). Defi J attended the show and went onstage to perform beatboxing and MCing freestyle with Bambaataa: "I had a lot of admiration for him, I respected him deeply" (ibid.).

The real connection between these two personalities took place in 1991 when Afrika Bambaataa came to a show organized at the former concert hall Canal Street in the central zone of the Brussels-Capital Canal, at the junction of several neighborhoods from which Belgian hip hop emerged. The night after, Afrika Bambaataa and several Belgian hip hop founders spent time together and met again the next day listening to musical projects from the emerging Belgian hip hop scene. Defi J (in Lapiower 1997: 60) explains the importance of Bambaataa:

> He's quite a major guy. I'm not saying that everything he did in terms of music is extraordinary, but he's a precursor of Hip Hop and he did a lot, that's what matters. In the USA, the Zulu Nation is a very important organization, many of the most famous groups are linked to it [...] He was a DJ, a rapper, now he is calmer, he invests himself in production, he helps others, the younger ones. This is also very important.

Fourmi (in Lapiower 1997: 61) explains his connection with Afrika Bambaataa:

> Zulu Nation is an organization within Hip Hop that has done much for the movement but does not represent all of it. A lot of people here, like myself and others, know the basics of this organization and its ideas, its rules, its beliefs, but it had never been concretized. When we met Afrika Bambaataa, after the Canal Street concert, he told us: 'Why don't you create your chapter [in English in the original French quote], I'll give you the texts, the tools to do it', we said O. K. After the festival in St-Gilles, at the Centre J. Franck, I saw the misunderstanding between the groups and the conflicts, while the movement is already so small in Belgium. So our main goal is to try to unify. Because if it goes on like this, in one year, it's over. We can't let this culture be lost, it's a godsend for young people. There are about forty of us, from different groups and different regions, we meet once a month to exchange ideas, we publish a small newspaper: 'Street Soul News'.

Bambaataa's visit to Brussels led to the creation of the Belgian Chapter of the Zulu Nation under the impulse of Fourmi, Defi J, and other Belgian hip hop pioneers. The main purpose of the UZN Belgian Chapter at its beginning was defined in terms of unity, to preserve the nascent hip hop movement in Belgium and avoid potential conflicts between its main representatives. This seems similar to why Afrika Bambaataa decided to create this organization in the US. If hip hop was born out of a desire to pacify tensions between potentially rival groups, there have always been tensions between different representatives and branches of the movement. Logics speak; tensions are "inherent" within hip hop as "idealistic intentions" meet the "nature of the environment" (i.e., the "street") of the actors. Actually, "Afrika Bambaataa […] understood this well, he did not want to deny these typical street realities but to make them *positive*,"[89] as Lapiower (1992: 37) underlines in what may be the first book about Belgian hip hop, published by the not-for-profit organization Lezarts Urbains (Fondation Jacques Gueux at that time).

In a video report from 1991 available on YouTube, the rap band Benny B also claims to be part of the Zulu Nation through a short acapella rap performance using lyrics taken from their song

[89] Highlighted by the editor.

"*Colère*" ["Anger"], released in 1990 (see below), which concludes:[90] "*We are for peace, we are not fools/ And we are part of the Zulu Nation/ Yo!"*

These findings from archive analysis on the emergence of hip hop in Brussels through dancing and extracts from semi-structured interviews allow us to highlight the dynamics of appropriation and glocalization, as emphasized in the framing of the theoretical approach to this research. Indeed, the broadcasting of cultural and artistic works presenting or representing US hip hop, through television, cinema screens, and music records, has enabled a whole generation of young people in the neighborhoods of Brussels to find an artistic and cultural ensemble they wanted to develop, identifying it as their place to claim in society: "Entering this 'move' meant becoming 'somebody', in a tight mesh of groups and well-known neighborhood icons to begin with." Their cultural identity would then be called "hip hop." The UZN mantra "Peace, Love, Unity and Having fun" would be the message of this nascent Francophone Belgian hip hop and the Zulu Nation Belgian Chapter: "Deeply pacifist (but not angelic, far from it!), multicultural, anti-delinquency, egalitarian, the hip hop mentality, as well as its interdisciplinary and its interdisciplinary vocation were formalized by activists such as Zulu Nation for example." These activists then defined their "philosophy of life" with these values, a philosophy "where the artistic is the symbolic outlet for the violence of the ghettos ('positivising negative energy'), but also a way to exist, to reclaim one's dignity and independence" (Lapiower and Van der Hoeven 2018: 323). In other words: "For although the Bronx is neither Paris nor Brussels, some of the inhabitants of these cities feel close to it" (Lapiower 1997: 12) and started to be involved in hip hop with "an important symbolic charge" (Béthune 2004: 38). However, as Fourmi highlights above, UZN does not represent the complete hip hop universe as its message did not spread to the whole of the US, as Ice Cube underlines when talking about Los Angeles and the emergence of gangsta rap.

This allows us to emphasize an important point in the dynamic of appropriation and glocalization of hip hop in Brussels during the 1980s—its link with the specific history of immigration in Belgium, as a majority of these hip hop pioneers are of immigrant descent (see below): "Hip hop was the first movement of real magnitude to highlight so many artists from working-class backgrounds and 'relegated neighborhoods', even if the movement was also a

[90] See *P.L.R/ Let's Go/ EPIC/ Happy Music*, "Benny B 'Yo!' – Reportage (VHS) 1991 – Partie 1/2" (starting from 0:29).

privileged place for gatherings between different social backgrounds that strengthened it" (Lapiower and Van der Hoeven 2018: 329). During a 2021 radio program about the origins of Belgian hip hop, the Brussels DJ, radio producer, and archivist Rokia Bamba explained that the main themes addressed by the hip hop of this time are the same in the US, France, and Belgium, "and it's very much linked to immigration, a generation born on the land of arrival and wondering what happened to their parents because they are not very talkative."[91] Nevertheless, Adrian Lyne, director of *Flashdance* (1983), in which the Rock Steady Crew dancers appear, explains that in the US "[a]t the time, it was rival gangs from the Bronx who created this kind of dance. They invented this instead of fighting each other" (Stiers 2007: 28). In Belgium, "everything was not immediately copied from what was done in the United States." The spirit animating breakdance battles could be different for certain people: "We [get] into it [...] because we like to dance, not necessarily because we live in a disadvantaged neighborhood" (Stiers 2007: 62).

Thus, as highlighted by certain pioneers, "it is to the mix of sport and fun that they have succumbed. To the mix of fun, of beauty of gesture, of the pleasure of the dance that they detect in the reports broadcasted on the German channels" (Stiers 2007: 47), just before the first broadcast of *H.I.P.H.O.P.* Talking about the latter, the fact that Sidney is a black man also played an important role in the positive identification that young people who admired him on television or in the public arena had. Sidney was the first mediatized transmitter of the Zulu Nation's hip hop message to the European Francophone space. He met Afrika Bambaataa through an intermediary who was a nightclub manager and was subsequently tapped by him to become the first presenter of a hip hop TV show, which then led to the creation of the UZN French Chapter. The story in Belgium seems quite similar. Defi J and Fourmi met Bambaataa following a show organized by a third party and he encouraged and helped them to create a UZN chapter in Belgium to spread the hip hop mind message and unify the movement:

> This state of mind is not just aesthetic or conventional. The specific features are intrinsically linked to the social origins and particular environments that gave birth to this movement, even if the social epicentre later shifted. It was an emancipatory process for its actors, who were trying to find meaning and a way out of an environment that was not predisposed to cultural expression, but also to personal fulfilment (Lapiower and Van der Hoeven 2018: 323).

[91] See *Radio Campus* (2021), "Aux origines du hip-hop belge / Miam des Médias" (starting from 10:00).

These findings about the glocalization process of the aesthetic and cultural features of hip hop during the 1980s in Francophone Belgium confirm the "significant influence [of the UZN] in the international spread of hip-hop as grounded in the African American and Black experience" (Morgan 2016: 138). In a context where the European audio-visual economic structure began to move towards liberalization and concurrency for fewer public authority interventions, the available visual material related to hip hop played a leading role in its European emergence. Indeed, "[a]lthough music videos have always served primarily to boost record sales, they have long aided another significant process: the transcultural exchange of hip-hop." As the case of Francophone Belgium demonstrates, "[y]oung people who watch videos from other cultures or nations can acquire a great deal of knowledge not only about the music, but also about the dance, fashion, style, and overall aesthetics of hip-hop in diverse cultures" (Morgan and Bennett 2011: 185).

Another example of these dynamics can be found in the dance show *Hip-Hop Story!* [in English in the original title], programmed at the Liège Theater in February 2022, which I attended, talking informally with a few participant artists, like DJ Sonar and the hip hop dancer Dacos. The dancer, choreographer, and stage director Kriman, the dance crew Prizon Break Rockerz, and DJ Sonar from Liège performed a dance and musical show aimed at introducing "Hip Hop culture, not only in terms of dance, but the culture as a whole, the energy that emanates from it, the birthplace and social context in which the culture was born and the different elements that compose it: Deejaying, Breaking, Graffiti, Rap."[92] At the performance I attended in the evening, I could observe the auditorium at full capacity with a more diverse audience than is typical at this theatre, gathering both youth and older people from multiple social and cultural origins. This was confirmed by several people working there, who highlighted that the aim to program such a performance at the theatre was precisely to promote a diversification of its audience. The show in itself was composed of several scenes divided into two types: those with the DJ alone onstage playing iconic black music or other songs sampled by US and French hip hop during the 1980s and 1990s; and others with both the dancers and the DJ in which the former embodied the role of transmitting hip hop culture through their fashion style, body language, dance moves, or interactions between them or with the audience. There was also a giant screen to serve as a backdrop, displaying images related to the temporality in which one or other scheme fits.

[92] See *Théâtre de Liège* (2022), "Hip-Hop Story ! + Blind."

The various scenes were then presented in chronological order, starting with the South Bronx and the block parties of DJ Kool Herc and ending with the dancers' personal memories when they began to dance regularly in Liège. The chronology of this staging relates a dynamic of glocalization through a triangulation between the US, France, and Francophone Belgium. Indeed, the first scenes represented the emergence of hip hop in the US, with the dancers interpreting hand-to-hand fighting between rival gangs, before the DJ played the famous song "Good Times" by Chic (1979) (sampled in "Rapper's Delight"). Then came a representation of the French period of the 1990s, which illustrated how these dancers from the second generation of b-boys in Liège could hear about hip hop. The song "*Bouger la tête*" ["To Move the Head"] by IAM (1997) was used to portray this scene, with the dancers dressed as if it was a school day (regular jeans and simple polo-shirt). An extract from the French rapper Shurik'n's verse on the song "*Bouger la tête*" illustrates the state of mind that the dancers wanted to transmit to the audience:

I came home from school one night, disgusted/ Thinking about all the homework I had to do
I walk in and see the TV, what is it/ What is it about these guys who spin on their hands and do roll-ups
For me, it was new, but it sure was/ My two feet and my head were already beating the beat
They say it all comes down to a roll of the dice/ But it was on the stroke of a bass drum that my destiny was decided
Glued to the beat, I forgot my books/ School and dance were incompatible
I was destined to make music/ Condemned to place sound beyond rhetoric
Thus, I owe it an eternal debt/ Which I discharge every time I make move heads

The last scene of the staging portrayed the dancers' memories of when they used to train and perform in Liège at a city-center train station called Liège-Palais (nowadays Liège-Saint-Lambert), an important historical venue for hip hop culture in Liège since the late 1980s.

This glocalization process seems to testify to intercultural circulations within a symbolic space as well as material ones in which populations find themselves linked with the same kind of experiences in societies, which deny or do not recognize them at the same level as other populations. The idea of triangulation and intercultural circulation through the record between the US, France, and Belgium is concretized in these life experiences marked by the discovery of the culture and practice of hip hop. This point is highlighted by the experience of Daddy K

during a 2022 audiovisual interview when he explained how France played a great role for him in his discovery and understanding of hip hop:

> It was hard to find stuff to show people we were hip hop. I remember the first trips I made, in quotes, clandestinely without telling my parents. I was going to Ticaret, to Dan,[93] and it was the Alibaba cave for us, it was a crazy thing [...] we were going crazy! And I discovered a lot of the culture through Stalingrad[94], all that, so France played a huge role for me, apart from the US, in terms of hip hop.[95]

Focusing on the intercultural roots and the path that such a cultural circulation entail leads then to highlighting a way in which people who would not necessarily meet can learn from each other. Relating to the concept of third space, Lapiower (1997: 275) talks of "interstitial space" to name the specific "path" created by hip hop. Creating such a space would be a "primary role" of hip hop (ibid.). Following this, "[t]he first political struggle of this movement was, and for a long time remained, simply to have the right to be heard, in the same way as other artistic movements" (Lapiower and Van der Hoeven 2018: 330). Hip hop would have to be a way to claim legitimacy and a self-constructed belonging and identity in society: "We also continued because we were convinced that this movement was a movement of social transformation, of identity consciousness, of political consciousness. It is it which allowed us to build ourselves," as it would have been the "only cultural reference" in which these practitioners recognized themselves (Kubilay, in Stiers 2007: 39).

Section 2
The emergence of Francophone rap music from Belgium

À force de s'bloquer dans des cases, on a menti (By dint of blocking ourselves in boxes, we have lied)
Il faut de tout pour faire un rap le but étant de rester authentique (It takes everything to make a rap, the goal being to remain authentic)
J'fais pas le gangster ça c'est véridique (I don't play the gangster, that's true)
Ma génération a connu le rap français à travers Benny B (My generation knew French rap through Benny B)
(Youssoupha, 2009, "*A force de le dire*")

[93] Ticaret was the first store in Paris dedicated to hip hop. It would become a must-visit and would enable many artistic connections between French hip hop protagonists: "Ticaret is like a big MJC [French Youth Center] where you can benefit from practical support and advice" (SK 2021).
[94] The Stalingrad wasteland is considered a founding site of hip hop culture in Paris and France (Bosque 2015).
[95] See *Clique TV* (2022), "Daddy K : l'origine belge du rap français – Clique Get Busy" (starting from 3:25).

This section reviews the emergence of Francophone Belgian rap music through the release of the first Francophone rap music hit in 1990 by the Brussels group and rapper Benny B, "*Vous êtes fous!*" ["You Are Crazy!"], and the first vinyl compilation of Francophone rap music in 1990 by the Brussels crew BRC, *Brussels Rap Convention Volume 1 – Stop the Violence*.

Benny B and Brussels Rap Convention (hereafter BRC) were formed at the beginning of the 1990s. "The emergence of Benny B represented the culmination of a period, the one of the first rap style all impregnated with the 'good time of the break', where the still timid cultural awareness gave way to fun and showmanship" (Lapiower 1997: 26). While the early and mid-1980s gave to Belgian hip hop its first popular attention through breaking, as well as fashion and lifestyles, it would disappear from the media landscape until the end of the 1980s. At this time, a kind of "revival" of popular attention given to hip hop happened. If the "show business" operating mode directly influenced this revival by starting to (again) pay attention to the growing hip hop movement, "the emergence of an enormous need, created by the gestation of a new social and cultural situation, both in Belgium and abroad" (Lapiower 1997: 19), must be considered. In November 1989, the main Francophone Belgian private television channel, RTL TVI, broadcast a news report about graffiti writing. This was the first time that the Francophone Belgian hip hop movement had appeared "in broad daylight" (Lapiower 1997: 24). A few months later, "a major intercultural event" occurred, the release of the first Francophone rap music hit "*Vous êtes fous!*" by the Brussels group and rapper Benny B: "Benny B is the birth of a little boy who wanted to succeed, to travel the world, to see the public in front of his eyes, to become someone."[96]

In the early 1980s, a young Brussels man living with his family in the Molenbeek-Saint-Jean neighborhood discovered hip hop culture and rap music thanks to his older brothers. Being the youngest, Benny B (Abdel Hamid Gharbaoui) had his older brothers as examples, and he grew up through them and especially the music they listened to. The first American rap music video clips on European TV, such as The Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" and Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five's "The Message," would cement Benny B to hip hop culture.[97] After leaving school because he wanted to work and contribute to his family's budget (a family of nine children and one salaried parent), the boy who would become Benny B became an

[96] See *Diversité sur scènes* (2021), "Emission - Bruxelles Ma Belle avec BENNY B" (starting from 1:20).
[97] See *Clique TV* (2019), "Clique Talk : Benny B, Mais Vous Êtes Fou ?"

apprentice chocolate maker at a famous Belgian chocolate brand. In Belgium, there were as yet no signs of an emerging rap scene, as the local hip hop was articulated around deejaying, dance, and graffiti.[98] Remembering his life before hip hop, Benny B explains how he was killing time by "spending hours and hours holding the walls" with his friends in the Molenbeek-Saint-Jean neighborhood "because after school you had nothing to do."[99] Passionate about dance since childhood ("I was bathed in dance, I was a crazy dancer since I was six years old"),[100] he became part of the emerging hip hop culture with the b-boy Perfect (Serge Nuten), a childhood friend, before meeting Daddy K at the Koekelberg Basilica.

At this time, Daddy K was European champion of breaking and also one of the world's top ten best DJs, as recognized by the DMC World DJ Championships.[101] In May 1990, Benny B and Daddy K released the maxi-single "*Vous êtes fous!*" ["You Are Crazy!"] on music producer Olivier Verhaege's label Vie Privée (Private Life). While Perfect is not officially credited on the single, by extension, the name Benny B often refers to the three members of the group and not only to A. H. Gharbaoui.[102] The two versions of the song present on the first edition of the maxi-single (the "Techno Version" and the "Hip Hop Mix" version) are the result of a casting organized by Verhaege through Brussels radio to find a rap in French to be broadcast firstly on radio and nightclubs. Benny B participated in the casting as a rapper. He had decided to start rapping around 1987 after having seen a TV show on which the French rapper Lionel D was performing: "And I said to myself: 'Ah, that's you!' I had to rap in French. I started writing" (Lapiower 1997: 28). He was now dancing and rapping on the streets of Brussels: "So I slowly detached myself from the street, from my friends in the neighborhood to get closer to the artistic world [...] And in the artistic world there was this evolution from dancer to rapper […] and then came what I never thought would happen."[103]

The objective of the casting organized by Verhaege was to find a rap in French that was commercial, fun, and calibrated for nightclubs. In this aim, it was necessary to develop an image of young people "who have fun with a new sound which was rap, with a dance music which

[98] See *Clique TV* (2022), "Daddy K : l'origine belge du rap français – Clique Get Busy."
[99] See *Diversité sur scènes* (2021), "Emission – Bruxelles Ma Belle avec BENNY B" (starting from 10:20).
[100] See *Diversité sur scènes* (2021), "Emission – Bruxelles Ma Belle avec BENNY B" (starting from 9:10).
[101] Annual DJ competition existing since 1985.
[102] The first album by Benny B (featuring DJ Daddy K), *L'Album*, would be released in December 1990. A second album appeared in April 1992 (featuring DJ Daddy K and Perfect) under the title *Perfect, Daddy K et moi* [*Perfect, Daddy K and me*]. By extension of language, these projects will be considered as albums of the group as a whole.
[103] See *Diversité sur scènes* (2021), "Emission – Bruxelles Ma Belle avec BENNY B" (starting from 12:00).

worked in the discotheques (rap did not work in the discotheques)" (Lapiower 1997: 31–32). Benny B explains:

> It wasn't a boy band casting, it was really a casting of guys who were looking for a rapper, I arrived with my vinyl, at the time it was Public Enemy, and I arrived I put my vinyl on, there were no choruses, there was nothing, '*Vous êtes fous!*' didn't exist. And so I started rapping like a savage, really hardcore [on the Public Enemy instrumental track], it's not the flow that you know in the record that you have now![104]

During a 2022 interview for the French media *Clique TV*, Daddy K also remembers this casting that gave birth to '*Vous êtes fous!*': "There was an audition where all the rappers of Brussels came and, in the end, it was decided between Defi J [see below] and Benny. And in the end Benny was chosen because he had a clearer diction and he had a more sympathetic face for the producers." When one of the interviewers asked Daddy K if the group were "prefabricated" following this casting, he moderates the statement by recalling the social context of Belgian hip hop at this time and by explaining the production and creation process of "*Vous êtes fous!*": "Prefabricated yes and no in the sense that Benny, Perfect and I were already dancing in the street, you know." He continues: "Like I said, there weren't that many of us in the movement, so we all knew each other, and we really danced together before we did the song you know," before concluding by saying:

> Yes it's a bit of a coincidence that Benny B was chosen, because there was nothing pre-built you know, but we were ready anyway, we were ready. We were dancing at three, Benny was rapping, I was at the turntables, I did breakdance, Serge [Perfect] did the choreos with us, so we were ready. Without knowing it, the producers already had something in hand.[105]

Thus, finally, Benny B proposed to keep the lyrics he had rapped during the audition (and had written in one night)[106] in order to create a full song with an original instrumental composition and structured following the classical popular modern music structures with intro, verses, chorus, bridges, outro, etc.

Explaining how he started to develop his artistic identity during his early years of adhesion and practice in hip hop, Benny B quotes his first main musical references in the culture, in addition

[104] See *Diversité sur scènes* (2021), "Emission – Bruxelles Ma Belle avec BENNY B" (starting from 4:55).
[105] See *Clique TV* (2022), "Daddy K : l'origine belge du rap français – Clique Get Busy" (starting from 9:15).
[106] See *Diversité sur scènes* (2021), "Emission – Bruxelles Ma Belle avec BENNY B" (starting from 4:40).

to Sugarhill and Grandmaster Flash: Big Daddy Kane, DJ Jazzy Jeff & Will Smith, Doug E. Fresh, EPMD, Eric B & Rakim, Kool Moe Dee, LL Cool J, Run-DMC, Slick Rick, and so on. He highlights: "So there's all this rap that are my real references which are those of the 80s from where my flow comes."[107] These developments allow us to speak more concretely about the artistic direction and music production of the song, and the balance between the ideas of the band Benny B and those of the label organizing the audition. As Daddy K underlines:

> The part of their artistic direction [speaking of the label] is quite simple: They didn't know hip-hop, they didn't know, they didn't recognize [it], they just wanted rap, they just wanted a rap song, they didn't even know it was part of a movement or anything, they wanted a Sugarhill Gang, number 2,[108] in French.

He continues: "Obviously as we come from this culture, we come with our ideas, we come with Benny's rap, which existed for a long time because he did it on a Public Enemy B-side you know," before highlighting that "the lyrics were very socially-conscious":[109]

> So Benny does his rap, I do the music with a buddy, Richard Q. [Richard Quyssens] [...] and I do my version. We play it to the producer and he says: 'Yeah it's nice but we would like it to be played in nightclubs, it will never be played in nightclubs [with this version]' you know.[110]

These explanations from Daddy K lead us to look briefly at the landscape of commercial music in Belgium in the late 1980s. Dance and house music were the most commercial and popular music genres intended for youth at this time. Belgium being geographically situated between the UK and the Netherlands and having more than half of its population speaking Dutch, the nightclub music and culture travelling from these respective countries were welcomed and consumed in Belgium. The song attesting most obviously to the popularity of these genres and to "club culture" in Belgium is the worldwide hit "Pump Up the Jam" by Technotronic, released in 1989. This song is the emblem of the electronic dance music genre called "New Beat," born in Belgium and fusing "elements of new wave, hi-NRG, EBM and hip hop (e.g. scratching). It flourished in Western Europe during the late-1980s."[111]

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[107] See *Diversité sur scènes* (2021), "Emission – Bruxelles Ma Belle avec BENNY B" (starting from 7:30).

[108] Daddy K seems to be referring to "The Message" by Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five (1982), which was produced by Sugar Hill Records, as well as "Rapper's Delight" by The Sugarhill Gang (1979).

[109] See *Clique TV* (2022), "Daddy K : l'origine belge du rap français – Clique Get Busy" (starting from 13:45).

[110] See *Clique TV* (2022), "Daddy K : l'origine belge du rap français – Clique Get Busy" (starting from 14:55).

[111] See *Wikipedia* (2023b), "New beat."

A few elements relating to the history and promotion of "Pump Up the Jam" are pertinent here. Technotronic is an electronic music project created in 1987 by Jo Bogaert (aka Thomas De Quincey or Nux Nemo), a Belgian New Beat musician based in Antwerp who sought to export his music to the US after enjoying some success in Belgium and Europe. In 1989, Manuela Kamosi, a b-girl of Belgian and Congolese origins who had lived in Chicago and had been active in Belgian hip hop for some years as a dancer under the name Ya Kid K, joined the project. As she explained during a 1990 filmed interview on UK television: "[Jo Bogaert] was looking for a 'black female rapper.'[112] I was the only one in the country."[113] The producer wanted to add rap vocals to his house and techno beats, which had not hitherto been tried in Belgium. Therefore, as a singer, she wrote and performed the lyrics for "Pump Up the Jam." Eric Martin, aka MC Eric, a rapper from Wales, also joined the group (*Tarmac* 2025). However, for marketing purposes, Ya Kid K was not credited as the author and performer on the first edition of the single and did not appear in the music video produced to promote it. Instead, Congolese model Felly Kilingi was credited as the featured singer and appeared in promotional photos and in the video, using lip-sync technology. ARS Records, which owned the rights to the song at the time, wanted to personalize it and have a female face for its promotion. ARS chose Felly Kilingi over the song's actual singer and co-writer, without the consent of the latter, as if the two people were perfectly interchangeable (*Wikipedia* 2025).

The first line of the song's chorus has long been misunderstood. In fact, the lyrics are: "*Awa*, a place to stay" whereas most people understood: "I want, a place to stay". This "topline" (a melodic and catchy rapping flow) written by Ya Kid K is the main hook that sticks in people's minds. In a 2020 interview, Jo Bogaert reflects on the song's influence on European house music in the 1990s and explains: "Yes, it is exactly that: a song. People sing along, they know the lyrics. Well, not all the lyrics. Most think Manuela sings 'I want, a place to stay,' but she sings '*Awa*, a place to stay.' *Awa* is Swahili (or Lingala, I'm not sure) for 'a place to stay, a home'."[114] In Lingala, the word "*áwa*" (or "*awa*") means "here" (which can be translated as "*hapa*" in Swahili).[115] Given that Ya Kid K had lived in Chicago and experienced hip hop culture there, she had a certain confidence and mastery of the Black American accent that came across to listeners when she rapped and sang in English, to the point of her being misconstrued

[112] Highlighted by Ya Kid K.

[113] See *Jean Bruce [Nocturbulous]* (2022), "Interview Technotronic" (starting from 0:05).

[114] See *Genius*, "Pump Up the Jam [Lyrics]."

[115] See *Globse*, "*áwa*"; "*hapa*". Swahili and Lingala are two of the most important languages in the DRC, as well as in East and Central Africa generally.

as a Black American singer and not a Belgian one. The confusion noted in the lyrics of the chorus can also be explained by this. These developments emphasize the fundamental importance of musicality, sonic substance, and specific musical praxis in their interaction with the reception of both lyrics and composition, thereby shaping the subsequent social analyses derived from them. Above all, it shows that despite the decisive importance of Ya Kid K's distinctive voice and her ease in rapping in English in making "Pump Up the Jam" a classic and historic global hit still listened to today, and despite her essential contribution to the song's creation, she was inviziblized by the label responsible for promoting it.

This practice is reminiscent of colonial value extraction, whereby colonizing powers exploit the natural resources and raw materials, as well as the cultural assets and human capital of colonized territories, for their own economic benefit. Applied to the global music industry in a postcolonial context, this involves identifying practices that lead to the appropriation and commodification of genres, styles, sounds, and technologies without equitable attribution or compensation, ultimately silencing or marginalizing non-Western artistic expressions and perpetuating Eurocentric power imbalances and biases. In the case of "Pump Up the Jam," the invisibility and exploitation of Ya Kid K's work and voice without any compensation would therefore reflect a kind of microcosm of neocoloniality for value extraction and exploitation within the global music industry. Ya Kid K would ultimately be credited as the author and performer on subsequent editions of the song, and she is nowadays acknowledged as such by listeners, critics, and observers.

More generally, it is interesting to note that this Belgian electronic dance music genre borrowed certain aesthetic codes and artistic ideas from hip hop culture, while the first Francophone rap music hit also borrowed some aesthetic codes from the New Beat and especially from Technotronic's "Pump Up the Jam." This fusion of house and rap music, labelled as "hip house" or "house rap," would enjoy another massive success in the 2010s with "*Alors on danse*" ["So We Dance"] by Stromae (see Chapter 12). Regarding "*Vous êtes fous!*", Benny B, after having recalled the context of the Belgian music world at the time, underlines: "We had the intelligence, to not remain underground, to use these same sounds to be able to make known the rap."[116]

[116] See *Clique TV* (2022), "Daddy K : l'origine belge du rap français – Clique Get Busy" (starting from 8:15).

Indeed, Daddy K explains that the label publishing and commercializing "*Vous êtes fous!*" "took the influence of hip hop music, they added pop music structures, they changed the rap sounds by dance sounds, techno sounds, they added hooks [i.e., phrases, onomatopoeia, or any other proclamation made by a rapper as a signature], and we have a quick success with a song that is a tidal wave."[117] The explanation of the creation of the instrumental and the chorus are good examples to show how the balance of the artistic direction of the song could be negotiated between the band Benny B and Private Life Records. Speaking of the original version of the instrumental produced by him and Richard Q., Daddy K explains that following its presentation to the label, the globally recognized Belgian DJ and music producer Junior Jack (Vito Lucente)[118] was asked to add an electronic dance music touch: "His specialty is to make dance music hits and we drew from Technotronic which at the time is number one in the world [with the song 'Pump Up the Jam'] and which is Belgian also." He specifies: "When you listen to the kick and the snare from '*Vous êtes fous!*', it is the same than 'Pump Up the Jam,' we didn't break our ass, we took the same."[119] After having made this version including the contribution of Junior Jack, Daddy K explained to the label: "Yeah okay guys it's cool but I still wish [for a] little more feeling that represents us."[120] The DJ wanted to strengthen the hip hop feel of the track by using vinyl manipulation techniques such as scratching or by adding specific sounds that he had selected, such as the famous guitar intro from the song "Son of Shaft" by the group The Bar-Kays, inspired by their song "Theme from Shaft" and composed on guitar by Charles Pitts for the soul and R&B artist Isaac Hayes, one of the most sampled musicians in hip hop.

Speaking of the final version of the song's chorus, Daddy K explains that the famous hook "*Mais, vous êtes fous! Oh oui*" ["But, you are crazy! Oh yes"][121] was present only once during the song's initial version, before the label proposed making it a proper chorus to be repeated several times. While the band Benny B did not initially agree with that idea, they finally conceded that it was a good one after listening to the final "Techno Version" of the song (the one that would be released). Daddy K explains:

[117] See *Clique TV* (2022), "Daddy K : l'origine belge du rap français – Clique Get Busy" (starting from 2:35).

[118] His most famous song being "Stupidisco" (2004) (and "Dare Me (Stupidisco)" (featuring Shena) (2006)) released by the British dance music label Defected for the UK and by Noise Traxx for Belgium, a Belgian house music label founded by Junior Jack.

[119] See *Clique TV* (2022), "Daddy K : l'origine belge du rap français – Clique Get Busy" (starting from 15:25).

[120] See *Clique TV* (2022), "Daddy K : l'origine belge du rap français – Clique Get Busy" (starting from 16:50).

[121] The chorus was originally created by Daddy K with vinyl samples from his childhood, including a record of the Japanese animated TV series *Captain Flam*.

> [The executive producer] had the intelligence in a way to use [this scratch sequence] as a chorus. And with hindsight today, yes it's true that this is what made the song successful in a way and so even if we didn't agree, in the end we said to ourselves: 'Well, anyway what have we got to lose?' We didn't think that it would become a hit or anything, we expected nothing. We dance in the street, we are called, [we are told]: 'Do a song,' we have fun, [we are told]: 'We have to add a little sentence here,' [we answer]: 'Go ahead, we put it.' We expect nothing, you know.[122]

The Belgian DJ continues by highlighting that the song did not make "much noise" when released in Belgium until a French radio station called Metropolis, close to the border with Belgium, started to play it regularly: "So they were the first ones to play it, to call us, to [make us] do our first show, in the North of France, and there was the video clip that was played a little bit but not much more."[123]

Speaking of the first show the band Benny B played in northern France after the Metropolis broadcasts of "*Vous êtes fous!*", Daddy K underlines the song's impact on young people when they performed it live for the first time: "It was hysteria, like: 'The Beatles are in the nightclub.'"[124] He goes on to explain that it was still not being played on the Belgian radio stations, while underlining that in Belgium "we always wait for it to work in France in order to work afterwards in Belgium, the media [...] they always wait for it to work in France. We still have the proof with Angèle, Damso, it is necessary first to be successful in France."[125] Shortly after, the group participated in a famous French TV show presented by the very well-known Jacques Martin. This media coverage allowed the single to explode in the charts.

The single was ultimately certified gold in Belgium and France (Lapiower 1997: 33). It was the first time that a Francophone rap song had achieved such a success and spread beyond the local scenes and the main networks of the Belgian hip hop movement. Consequently, it "crushed (for a very short time) the myth of the inaccessibility of the Top 50" (Lapiower 1992: 7). This is how thousands of people in Belgium came to rap music through Benny B's "*Vous êtes fous!*" The group began a tour in Belgium and in France ending on May 1992 at the Olympia: "Stages, television, appointments of press, shooting of clips, recording sessions, a new life settles for the three B-boys" (Lapiower 1997: 34). In a short 2021 video interview, Benny B and Daddy K remember this period: "We were dancing in the street at the beginning and we are in the

[122] See *Clique TV* (2022), "Daddy K : l'origine belge du rap français – Clique Get Busy" (starting from 18:15).
[123] See *Clique TV* (2022), "Daddy K : l'origine belge du rap français – Clique Get Busy" (starting from 19:25).
[124] See *Clique TV* (2022), "Daddy K : l'origine belge du rap français – Clique Get Busy" (starting from 19:50).
[125] See *Clique TV* (2022), "Daddy K : l'origine belge du rap français – Clique Get Busy" (starting from 20:20).

spotlight from one day to the next, everyone wants us, all the TV shows, we earn a lot of money, so it can go freak out, we were young."[126] Benny B is considered nowadays as "one of the pioneers of Francophone hip hop." During a 2019 interview on the French media *Clique TV*, he explains how he positioned himself regarding this:

> It's a big word that makes many people have different opinions about it. I'm one of the pioneers because apart from the visual side and the media side, I was among people who danced at least at the time, whether standing or in breakdance and then actually, if we talk commercially, it's the first track that was broadcasted on the radio waves and that was broadcasted on TV, it's '*Vous êtes fous!*' and therefore I'm the first rapper known in all the cottages of France and Francophone Belgium.[127]

The analysis of the song lyrics is interesting for the research. While Benny B echoes generally the outcome of a rather festive, innocent, and entertaining rap music, the lyrical analysis tells us about the state of the nascent Belgian hip hop movement by highlighting its socially critical stand. Indeed, the first two verses (see the complete lyrics translated in the appendices) allow us to glimpse Benny B's state of mind in his practice of hip hop and rap culture, as well as his initial motivation to be involved in it. Echoing the words of Phil One, related above, about the specific living context of these young pioneers of Belgian hip hop, Benny B claims his willingness to escape from this situation, to keep working with quiet positivity and a kind of optimism. Speaking of some US pioneers of hip hop, Fourmi highlighted in the same interview that these people "came from poor neighborhoods, they said: 'We want to express ourselves, we want to show who we are, we want to show that we are here'."[128] This state of mind seems then quite similar to that of Benny B at the beginning of "*Vous êtes fous!*" The third verse drives on with the same idea by focusing more specifically on hip hop culture itself:

I'm one of the B-Boys, it's a style that's feared/ On the radio, on TV if you ever listen to us
I want you to think of us/ And I want you to tell once and for all
To the people who don't like us that we'll go on our way/ Yes this is French rap [i.e., Francophone rap]
Stronger than ever/ Bringing with it the bottom of all its secrets
But we B-Boys can't help but listen/ If you don't understand, hey, you're not hip [i.e., trendy]

[126] See *La DH* (2021), "Les souvenirs de Benny B et Daddy K."
[127] See *Clique TV* (2019), "Clique Talk : Benny B, Mais Vous Êtes Fou ?" (starting from 1:30).
[128] See "Back to the roots of Belgian RAP with BRC..." (n. d.) (starting from 0:55).

It is interesting to note that Benny B insists on the fact that it is a rap song in French. This demonstrates his commitment to establish a recognized Francophone hip hop culture and rap music genre. This positioning is obviously positive for the nascent Belgian hip hop movement, but also for the commodification of its artifacts, as explained in the next chapter, with the same song as an example. As mentioned above, the UZN played a pivotal role in the evolution of the Belgian hip hop movement, as evidenced by Benny B's assertion in the 1991 video report that he was part of the Zulu Nation. In another song, "*Ecoute! C'est du rap français*" ["Listen! It's Francophone rap"],* released in 1990 on *L'Album* [*The Album*], Benny B explains in verse one that, according to him, Francophone rap is "born of nation that dominates today":

Hold your ears, work your brains/ *Show them for once that you are not a monkey*
Because today you have the proof by listening to my beat/ *That after so much effort French rap* [i.e., Francophone rap] *exists*
And my idea is to send the message/ *Tell everyone that French rap has anger*
That he was born of a nation that dominates today/ *And all the B-Boys (go!) are part of it*

These lyrics drive on the same idea as the third verse of "*Vous êtes fous!*" when claiming and reasserting the existence of "French rap," intended in the context as Belgian Francophone rap, born from the hip hop culture exported by the "Zulu Nation" and imported to Francophone Belgium by pioneers "B-Boys" such as Benny B, Daddy K, and Perfect. These findings explain the significance of both the chorus and the title of the song "*Ecoute! C'est du rap français*." While its third verse concludes with the same line, it opens with a kind of awareness that is particularly interesting for this research:

I don't do politics but I open your eyes/ *In this unreal world where you can't do what you want*
Don't confuse rap [music] *with a simple song*/ *It's a message of peace that speaks in a different way*
I ask only one thing, that we listen to me/ *I only tell the truth there is no doubt* […]
What you hear is French rap [i.e., Francophone rap] *and it's gonna do some damage*

Explaining that he is not doing "politics" while he tries to spread his "message of peace" using "French rap" captures again the general state of mind of the pioneers of Belgian hip hop and rap music. A last interesting thing to note with this song comes from the last verse repeating the first, a song structure that echoes the vinyl record manipulation techniques that gave birth to hip hop deejaying, such as the Merry-Go-Round and the looping.

"*Colère*" ["Anger"] from Benny B's 1990 album reaffirms this willingness to advocate for peace and justice while claiming its appartenance to the Zulu Nation: "*We are not on the side of the bastards/ Let's not be afraid to shout it out, they must be locked up/ We are for peace, we are not fools/ And we are part of the Zulu Nation*." These lyrics deepen the context in which the message of peace is diffused and received by certain people according to Benny B. These thoughts capture again how hip hop at this time would generally consider the society in which it is performed.

A last point to highlight regarding "*Colère*" comes from one of the samples used in the song—a sample from a speech by Khalid Abdul Muhammad (Harold Moore Jr.), which is repeated before each verse: "Have you forgotten that once we were brought here, we were robbed of our name, robbed of our language? We lost our religion, our culture, our God… And many of us, by the way we act, we even lost our minds." This speech extract also starts a 1988 song by Public Enemy called "Night of the Living Baseheads."[129] The Public Enemy song is about recognition and history of hip hop and rap culture[130] and we can assume that Benny B sampled it from this context. Muhammad (1948–2001) was a recognized member, activist, and minister of the Nation of Islam and then the national chairman of the New Black Panther Party.[131] He is known for his extremist thoughts against Jewish, Catholic, white, and homosexual people, as well as extremist Afrocentrism. Certain US hip hop artists were interested in him and his influence, including Public Enemy, Ice Cube, and MC Ren. While it is not surprising that these artists demonstrated closeness to Muhammad's views in the specific context of US hip hop being rooted in American postcolonial settings, it would not necessarily be the same regarding the general image projected by a group like Benny B (see below). Nevertheless, the extract of the speech used by Benny B resonates with the national and regional histories in which "global hip hop" is rooted.

This leads to us addressing an important point about the release of "*Vous êtes fous!*", which is the particular attention that Benny B paid to showing their own cultural references coming from hip hop when creating the back and front cover of the single. Benny B personally chose the

[129] See Genius, "Night of the Living Baseheads [Lyrics]."

[130] A song illustrated with a rather parodic and comic music video.

[131] The New Black Panther Party should not be confused with the original BPP. It is not the official heir to the BPP and some original Panthers have criticized it on several occasions, notably for its supremacist or anti-Semitic positions, which have led to strong tensions between the New Black Panther Party and these original Panthers (Mulloy 2010).

elements of the front cover photograph to accurately reflect the imagery of hip hop at the time. He begins by pointing out that one of the main differences between contemporary Francophone rap music and early Francophone rap music is that the latter follows a culture:

> It's true that we used to follow a culture. The culture was that Benny B was born with the influence of American rap. So I was rapping in French and so what was a B-Boy? He was a guy who could follow all the different cultures that were in hip-hop. That is to say, the dance, the graffiti, the look, the clothes, everything was important!

Benny B then points out that they imposed a specific cover for the marketing of the single to the general public, because they "really wanted to show the whole culture all mixed up but on one front cover."[132]

On the cover intended for the general public, several elements specific to hip hop culture and hip hop music are clearly visible, as well as on the first version of the single cover intended only for DJs. This is a photo showing A. H. Gharbaoui (Benny B) and A. Desproot (Daddy K) behind a sound system controlled by Desproot. The sound system here consists of two vinyl turntables and a basic hand-mixer with a listening switch, i.e., the crossfader, for better mixing and transitions between the two channels into which the turntables are plugged, as Grandmaster Flash had innovated. The turntables used for the photo are from Technics, a Japanese brand of high-end electronic equipment, being the model SL-1200 MK2. This specific model (along with its black color version, the Technics SL-1210 MK2 model) is iconic in hip hop, having long been the preferred vinyl turntable of many hip hop DJs worldwide. This is due to the quality of manufacture of these turntables and their specific characteristics, especially the launching motorization of the vinyl, which is based on the principle of the "direct drive" allowing the DJ a 100% control on the latency related to the moments of starting and stopping the vinyl being played. These technical features seem thus to have been designed specifically for certain aesthetic codes relating to the production of hip hop music in its early days, notably the vinyl manipulation techniques developed by DJ Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, and Grand Wizzard Theodore. The development of these turntables by Technics is therefore a telling example of the democratization of access to the production of hip hop through technological innovation (this point being a key element in the access and internationalization of hip hop). By featuring

[132] See *Clique TV* (2019), "Clique Talk : Benny B, Mais Vous Êtes Fou ?" (starting from 6:30).

these turntables on the cover of their single, the group Benny B were effectively highlighting their cultural and artistic identity coming from hip hop.

Behind the hip hop sound system, Benny B and Daddy K adopt specific poses that are reminiscent of certain body postures common in hip hop. Benny B is seen waving with his thumb up and his arm around Daddy K's shoulder to indicate they are a team. With his other hand, he seems to be using his index finger to indicate the sound system and thus emphasizing its presence on the cover. Daddy K adopts a specific scratching DJ pose while using his right leg to play one of his two vinyls, his left hand for the other vinyl, and his right hand to handle the crossfader on the mixer. This exemplifies the technical skills of DJ Daddy K, who was already recognized at the time as one of the best hip hop DJs in Europe. Both Benny B and Daddy K have hairstyles that were not common among the population at the time and are representative of hip hop culture. We can note that Daddy K wears Nike Air sneakers, a model very common in hip hop culture and "streetwear." He also wears a visible watch, the wearing of jewelry being also a common fashion practice in hip hop. He wears more jewelry around his neck—a necklace shaped like the African continent with pan-African (and Rasta) colors. Benny B can be seen wearing a jumper with the word "Zulu" clearly printed on it.

Other visual material analyses can be formulated through the music video for "*Vous êtes fous!*" This starts with one of the most famous choreographic movements of breaking, the "headspin," when the dancer turns on their head.[133] We then see Daddy K performing a series of scratches behind his sound system, wearing a t-shirt with the word "DJ" on it and using specific gestures indicating that he has the secret. Benny B interprets then the rapped moments of the song through different shots whose aesthetics are intended to remain coherent, which can attest to the professional quality of this clip and show that it was realized under professional production conditions. In some shots, Benny B is rapping alone, emphasizing the rap music itself, while in others Daddy K and Perfect appear together as dancers. In other shots, the three members of Benny B are dancing together while certain shots contain light and shadow effects to emphasize the choreography. The video clip is spotted throughout by shots of Daddy K scratching on turntables as a way to emphasize DJing.

[133] The next chapter gives the example of the French TV presenter Jacques Martin to show how this movement could promote hip hop culture in Francophone Europe in the early 1990s.

At first glance, it seems, surprisingly, that graffiti writing is not represented in the video, except for the appearance of a placard that reads "But you are crazy" ["*Mais vous êtes fous*"], which recalls practices from the broad street art movement. However, if we put the clip in its historical context, this absence can be understood despite Benny B's desire to promote the entirety of hip hop arts and culture. In the early 1990s, graffiti in Belgium was essentially a relatively secretive, illegal practice. The vandalism aspect of this art world at the time meant that it was repressed by the authorities. We could assume that Benny B wanted to avoid giving out leads to any information related to the civil identity of graffiti artists from the movement at the time. Finally, there are thumbs-up hand signals in the choreography and children having fun with the group while listening to the song. This would help to support the overall message of the promotion of hip hop arts and a certain positive state of mind within this artistic, cultural, and social (early) movement. Speaking about another video clip, "Do you speak *martien*?" (1990, original title in English),[134] Benny B (A. H. Gharbaoui) explains that he "wanted to prove that [the group] came from hip hop and that everything [he] did was for hip hop."[135] Approximately 30 years after the single's release, when discussing the impact of the band on people and the younger generation at the time, Benny B explains how he came to realize the true impact of the single's success:

> In fact, in one go, when we went on stage, we addressed a whole population which at that time was lacking in artistic identity [...] so we arrived, there was the street on stage […] It's like a breath of fresh air [...] it's really the testimonies of people who explained to me the effect it had on them at the time and that's how I realised that in fact '*Vous êtes fous!*' is not just a single, otherwise it would not have lasted as long. '*Vous êtes fous!*' was a turning point in the history of music actually! [...] I didn't think that 30 years later, I would still be on stage.[136]

If Benny B's 1990 "*Vous êtes fous!*" was the first hit, it was not the first Francophone rap music song released on vinyl. In early 1990, the hip hop collective BRC (Brussels Rap Convention) released the first compilation of rap music songs in French, the record *Brussels Rap Convention Volume 1 – Stop the Violence* [in English in the original title]. BRC was generally considered as embodying the cultural awareness and socially conscious stance of hip hop more than Benny B, albeit not having been conceived as an alternative to them. It was "the best known rap group in Belgium after Benny B. It is also the oldest and most solicited by the media, as far as 'street rap' is concerned." According to Lapiower (1997: 48), "BRC was deeply attached to a

[134] Except for the French word "*martien*", which is translated into English as "Martian." The title of this song is thus a play on words that would suggest three languages: English, French, and "Martian."
[135] See *Clique TV* (2019), "Clique Talk : Benny B, Mais Vous Êtes Fou ?" (starting from 11:00).
[136] See *Clique TV* (2019), "Clique Talk : Benny B, Mais Vous Êtes Fou ?" (starting from 13:30).

'missionary' vocation. Very involved in a movement, still unknown but stirring [...] for them, the Hip-Hop was always a 'movement' before being a personal springboard." Defi J was one of BRC's founding members. Following the release of a maxi-single called "Fly Girl" in 1990, the Indisc Belgium label asked Defi J to produce a rap compilation in which he invited other hip hop artists from Brussels, Liège, and France. Daddy K, part of the BRC project, used to invite the rappers of the crew to his home to produce rap songs. He explains:

> We had fun, we didn't specifically want to reach the radio stations, we didn't expect anything in return, it was our first record, and we were all happy to be able to say or propose what we wanted to do on vinyl. It was a dream come true for us; there were no expectations behind it.[137]

Phil One is another important member of BRC, involved in it as DJ. Being part of "the middle class" that "identified to Hip-Hop from the streets," Phil One was not captured in the "cliché" of the youngster b-boy from disadvantaged neighborhoods. He explains: "We were doing something we loved, we weren't trying to make money, but we were trying to get the messages and ideas across. And that's why we were proud of ourselves. We went to the neighborhoods, to the youth centres, we animated courses, set up radio programs" (Lapiower 1997: 57–58). BRC's public career began on September 5, 1990, at a show organized by Fun Radio in the city of Liège to promote *Stop the Violence*, with all the crews that participated in the compilation:

> This season's debut was the most spectacular moment of impact, crowned by a sold-out concert at the *Studio Galerie* in Brussels, the club in the *Galerie Louise* where DJ and dance championships were regularly held […] BRC remained the most advanced and solid 'non-commercial' Francophone group in the country until 1993, when a change of circumstances in the rap scene took place (Lapiower 1997: 59).

The cover of the compilation shows a seated baby b-boy (recognizable by his haircut and sportswear) who does not appear to be in motion. Tears are streaming from his eyes as he stands in front of the typical road sign indicating "stop." The sign reads "Stop the violence" (the name of the compilation), which suggests why the b-boy is crying. The objective of this cover was to promote non-violence as a core value in Francophone Belgian hip hop and this was achieved by presenting violence as a negative concept and ensuring that it had no place in the movement.

[137] See *Clique TV* (2022), "Daddy K : l'origine belge du rap français – Clique Get Busy" (starting from 13:30).

The following text analyses certain rap lyrics from the *Stop the Violence* compilation. "*Couleur noir* [sic]" ["Black Color"], performed by Defi J & Rumky, talks about exclusion and inclusion in society, will and right to express, and recognition of early hip hop culture. Defi J's chorus delivers: "*Black color, yes you think of despair/ In the depths of your memory, the thoughts become bitter/ I, for my part, take the same pretext/ To explain to people the effect of my anger*." When analyzing the verses, it seems that the lyrics are addressed to the practitioners of hip hop culture, to encourage them to continue to affirm themselves and to work for the recognition of hip hop and those who make it live. Indeed, the last verse states:

This Ethiopia, I see that, I am sad, unhappy, it's awful/ Come, let's throw them a wish
To all those who approve, let's have a run together/ We are the only ones left, we are their only help
They knock, they knocks, it's not the right door/ When no one opens it for them, it's not the move
We must not believe that everything will always remain at the top/ Just by screaming in the street
Hip Hop

In the reference to situation of war in Ethiopia during the 1980s, Defi J seems to appeal for the unity of "those who approve" of his viewpoint while saying that these latter could be represented by "the move" and the hip hop culture. Finally, he calls for caution regarding the situation at the time and this configuration where hip hop was on top. He is certainly referring to the first widespread hip hop craze in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the commercial success of "*Vous êtes fous!*" These lyrics appear quite prescient, knowing that this first generalized craze for hip hop in Francophone Belgium will fade relatively quickly, unlike the French situation, which will experience a kind of (first) "golden age" in the second half of the 1990s.

The music video for "*Couleur noir*" (1991) shows the different artistic disciplines of hip hop culture, and particularly breaking, through personal rushes taken from Defi J's concerts, events, performances in the streets, or scenes shot specifically for the video. We see also other Belgian hip hop pioneers like Phil One. The video is thus designed around the message of the song and brings a visual dimension to the will to promote and recognize hip hop culture, including the unity of the elements that constitute it. This approach is the same as the video for "*Vous êtes fous!*"

The song "Apartheid" by Defi J and scratched by Daddy K, released in 1990 as B-side of the maxi-single "Fly Girl," while not being on the BRC compilation, is in the same line as "*Couleur noir*." Indeed, the following lyrics from the first verse show how Defi J challenges and contests apartheid policies because, in his opinion, these oppress the population and therefore constitute "human rights violations":

You ask for liberation of all those oppressed/ Who have the right to exist. Tear away their dignity
'What, what, what?' [DJ scratch (Daddy K), i.e., 'what do you say?']/ Sorry, human rights violations, I cannot dispute
You see, I think of apartheid. You don't see it thriving/ Synonymous with cancer, danger, the planet is in trouble

The central principle of the apartheid segregationist political regime in South Africa was the very unequal distribution of rights between different racialized groups assigned to specific geographical areas. South Africa's "white" minority enjoyed full citizenship, while the other groups ("Blacks," "Colored," "Indians") did not. It is therefore a system of oppression and domination by one racialized group over another, institutionalized through discriminatory laws, policies, and practices that are considered contrary to human rights.

At the end of the verse, Defi J makes it clear to the listener that he is addressing apartheid directly: "*Apartheid! Yes, I'm telling you again/ You are breaking my head. Inverted commas, anger/ The people are waking up, the world is awake/ Apartheid, we are ready, make sure you say your prayers*." The second verse starts with the following lyrics: "*You know I don't do politics, but only criticism/ Defi J*," before criticizing capitalism and talking about other human rights like freedom of speech. While Defi J specifies that he does not do "politics," in the sense of formalized political activities within a particular political system, the political message carried by the song is obvious. Defi J's aim is to make clear his opposition to apartheid while standing up for human rights.

In a 2011 interview with the online media *La Voix du Hip Hop*, Defi J explains what hip hop is about, in his view, and highlights that "when we [are] going back in the past, HipHop is also a way to denounce without necessarily bringing solutions, to be the information of what touches our daily life." The song "Apartheid" expresses this thought quite well. Feeling close to the oppressed people of South Africa, Defi J decided to dedicate a song to this situation, which he

believes is problematic not only for South Africa, but for the entire planet and humanity. In the early days of hip hop, certain well-known artists opposed apartheid, such as Kool Herc, Melle Mel, Kurtis Blow, Run-DMC, and Afrika Bambaataa, in the protest song "Sun City" (1985), in collaboration with other well-known artists such as Bruce Springsteen, Miles Davis, Bob Dylan, and George Clinton among others. These artists gathered in the Artists United Against Apartheid collective to produce this song and an eponymous album whose direction is that of protest songs against apartheid. According to Jeff Chang when talking about the rise of the post-Civil Rights era in the US: "The anti-apartheid movement represented the climax of a century of anticolonial and antiracist resistance, the light piercing the last darkness before the dawn of a new global century," while it would trigger violent reactions from the political right (2005: 215, 219). Other recognized rappers such as the iconic New York duo Eric B. & Rakim talked explicitly about apartheid in "In the Ghetto" (1990): "*Not only there, but right here's an apartheid/ So now is the time for us to react/ Take a trip through the mind, and when you get back/ Understand your third eye's seen all of that*." These lines from Rakim echo well those of Defi J.

Speaking of the reception of the general hip hop philosophy in Francophone Belgium, the song "Peace in the World" (in English in the original title), released on the BRC compilation and performed by the Brussels rapper Rayer, gives other insights about the political expressions of early Francophone Belgian rap music. Rayer started rapping in 1988 and co-founded, in 1989, another pioneering Francophone Belgian hip hop crew, the RAB (*Rien A Branler* [Nothing to give a fuck about]) crew. Rayer and other members of RAB would go on to create the famous Belgian hip hop group De Puta Madre[138] (see Chapter 8).

In 1991, young hip hop artists from Schaerbeek "had the idea to create a Rap event whose theme would be drug prevention: organize a rap festival" (Bastin and Banai 1991: 7). In collaboration with the state-subsidized not-for-profit organization Bouton Blanc, located in the Brussels district of Schaerbeek and bringing together family members of deceased and dropout drug users (no longer active today) and with another state-subsidized not-for-profit organization called Infor-Drogues—offering "information, help and advice to any person or community in an anonymous manner"[139] about drug consumption—with the support of the Federation

[138] See *IDLM* (2024a), "Rayer."
[139] See *Infor-Drogues* (2022), "Accueil."

Wallonia-Brussels through the Ministry of Health, and with the American film and entertainment studio Warner Bros—BRC organized the festival Rap Against Drugs in Schaerbeek in July 1991. As the members of the crew explained during the press conference, the aim was

> to express what we have in us, and the warning that we want to communicate to everyone, and especially to the young people who would not be so optimistic and enthusiastic, and who need to hear us, who need their fellow man to hear that life is beautiful and that there are many constructive things to do in this world (Bastin and Banai 1991: 7).

They continue:

> We are young from Schaerbeek, all friends. We go to school for the most part, and on the side, we make rap music, we graffiti, we talk on the radio, in short, we communicate what we have to say in our own way. We would like this event to be the first of many, and that these will carry the message that we want to spread at all costs: peace in the world, love for one's neighbor, and, if each one is responsible for his or her life, the other is there to make it more beautiful and richer (ibid.).

This captures thus the general message that the crew wanted to spread through the event, a message in line with the general philosophy of the movement when it began to develop in Belgium. The lyrics of "Peace in the World," performed during the festival, are another example of the way this message can be framed and affirmed:

And the rage I have it often as in this moment, that's why I can better express my feelings/ And to express them better I put them in my raps
In my raps in French because it's the only language I know/ But if in French I like to pass a message, it is in the hope that one day the man becomes a little wiser

The message to be retained is thus formulated in a very clear way and wants to promote a certain wisdom that would support peace in the world. The use of the rap medium is also affirmed as the main vector of these thoughts.

In another song released in 1991, "*Je crie* peace [in English in the original lyrics]*" ["I scream peace"], Rayer (credited here as M.C. Rayer) spreads the same kind of message. The lyrics allow Rayer to deepen his message of peace while allowing him to evoke certain fears about

future generations and the world itself, which reinforces the importance of his initial message. It is interesting to note the explicit ecological concern of the first verse, with this type of awareness being much less widespread at that time than it is today. The second verse is more optimistic and recalls a posture that promotes determination and a "not giving up" mindset embodied in hip hop. Rayer is explicitly claiming for a mindset change at the end of the verse and we can assume that he intends to promote a "hip hop state of mind." The DJ intro and the DJ hook are on the same line as the general message. The intro, when saying "*Party time is anytime and anytime is party time*" [in English in the original song], seems to recall the importance of the "having fun" stand in the hip hop movement while the voice sample stating "*Peace in the world*" recalls the peaceful posture of hip hop philosophy. The third verse is in the same spirit and reinforces again the message while insisting on the importance of freedom of speech:

[…] *You must be fed up, it's always the same story/ A story that revolves around a new cry for hope*
"Bow-wow-wow-yippie-yo-yippie-yeah" [scratch], *(peace in the world!)* [X2]
[…] *The fact of speaking freely and at any time/ Put me in a good mood, yeah me the little rapper*
I dedicate this rap to all those who are not afraid/ To say what they think of those who impose terror
Without whom we couldn't live such a good life/ And it's for them that I'm now shouting…

We note directly the use of the famous hook from George Clinton, one of the godfathers of funk music, "*Bow-wow-wow-yippie-yo-yippie-yeah/Bow-wow-yippie-yo-yippie-yeah*," as a DJ scratch in the first line. This hook derives from the song "Atomic Dog" released in 1982. Since 1993, the hook has become famous in hip hop because of the songs "Fuck Wit Dre Day (And Everybody's Celebratin')" and "Who Am I (What's My Name)?," both produced by Dr. Dre with his right-hand man Snoop Dogg rapping the hook. In 2000, the song "Bow Wow (That's My Name)" by Lil' Bow Wow (and Snoop Dogg) definitively inscribes this hook into hip hop's intangible cultural heritage.

Two interesting points for the research can be highlighted by comparing the way Rayer and Dr. Dre used George Clinton's hook. The first is that Rayer and his producers used it in 1991, two years before Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg started to popularize it worldwide thanks to huge commercial success. The second relates to the main reason why these artists chose to use the hook. "Fuck Wit Dre Day (And Everybody's Celebratin')" is very well known in hip hop because in addition to its commercial success as one of the lead singles from Dr. Dre's first solo

album, *The Chronic*, it is in some ways the official declaration of war between Dr. Dre and his former N.W.A sidekick, Eazy-E. Indeed, in this song, Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg reply for the first time to several attacks from Eazy-E and other people since N.W.A broke up for mainly contractual and personal reasons in the early 1990s. The first lines of Snoop Dogg's verse saying "*Bow wow wow yippy yo yippy yay/ Doggy Dogg's in the motherfuckin' house/ Bow wow wow yippy yo yippy yay/ Death Row's in the motherfuckin house/ Bow wow wow yippy yo yippy yay/ The sounds of a dog brings me to another day*," recall the importance of George Clinton in the creation of the G-funk sub-genre by Dr. Dre, and of the record label Death Row Records in the expansion of a whole hip hop universe. While the hook is used here in a general context of "internal war response" in gangsta rap,[140] the use of Rayer is a dichotomy since he is calling for "peace in the world." This comparison shows that the transatlantic circulation of the vinyl does not necessarily imply that a sample (or a reference) used in various hip hop songs will foster the same approach or the same message.

The song "*Je crie* peace" appears therefore as a denunciation of inequalities and a call to react to this situation, while spreading a message of peace and finally insisting on the importance of freedom of speech to continue denouncing this kind of situation through rap music. It crystallizes a will to promote a kind of pacifist dynamic by highlighting the importance of freedom of expression and the perpetuation of hip hop culture and rap music as means to concretize this will and thus take a self-defined place in society.

Let us now return to the Rap Against Drugs festival and, more specifically, to the analysis of its context. The festival took place shortly after some events in Brussels in May 1991 (in the neighborhood of Saint-Antoine, in the municipality of Forest, and in the municipality of Saint-Gilles) following accusations of police violence against a young Brussels man of North-African origins and his family. During a police check, the latter were said to have been authoritarian towards the young man who was riding a motorbike. One of the police officers reportedly told him, "I am the law," before the young man's father and other family members got involved and were also subjected to police brutality. Dozens of young people then joined the protest and

[140] Eazy-E answered in his classic song "Real Muthaphuckkin G's" (1993) with the iconic lines "*Motherfuck Dre! Motherfuck Snoop! Motherfuck Death Row! / Yo, and here comes my left blow*". When Eazy-E fell ill with AIDS, Dr. Dre visited him at the hospital shortly before his death in 1995. At the end of the promo video for the song "I Need a Doctor" (2011), which looks back on Dr. Dre's career, we see him visiting the grave of Eazy-E (Eric Wright). These few contextual elements may show that, as with many other disputes in (American) rap music, it was also about keeping a certain amount of entertainment about it and about the various artworks related to it.

violent clashes with the police took place for two days. These events are known in Belgium as the "Forest riots" (Winkel 2021). This violence can also be understood in a more general context where "racist positions of various local politicians" (Bastin and Banai 1991: 8) against disadvantaged and immigrant populations in Brussels have led to policies, practices, and political discourse tinged with a racializing dimension, as those of Mayor Nols can exemplify (see above). As one of the Deputy Royal Commissioners for Immigration Policy[141] at the time explains: "In the 1950s and 1960s, Belgium pursued a deliberate immigration policy, bringing in Italian, then Spanish, Portuguese, Greek, Moroccan and Turkish workers. But after the economic crisis of the early 1970s, their presence and that of their descendants generated xenophobic feelings among some politicians" (Bruno Vinikas, in Winkel 2021). Indeed, in a context of post-World War II national reconstruction where coal was the main source of energy for most industrial sectors, Belgium encouraged labor immigration by quotas of people from other European countries.

A brief historical overview of immigration policies in Belgium after World War II can begin in 1946 with a protocol signed by Belgium and Italy, the latter being in a quite difficult political and socio-economic situation, providing for tens of thousands of Italian workers to be sent to Belgian coalmines. Other agreements were signed between Italy and Belgium, and the 1950s saw the signing of agreements with Spain and Greece. In 1964, agreements were signed with Morocco and Turkey. A period of quota-based labor immigration then began in which many foreign workers came to Belgium to work in the industrial and construction sectors, particularly in mining and the steel industry. The first oil crisis in 1974 marked the demise of the first wave of labor and economic immigration to Belgium. As a result of widespread internal unemployment, the influx of foreign labor ceased completely. In Western Europe, immigration was considered "a circumstantial economic phenomenon" (Martiniello 2011: 20) until the early 1970s, explaining the decision to stop labor immigration after the oil crisis. Nevertheless, immigration became "a structural component of North European societies" as immigrant people were settling permanently: "This fact, which is difficult to accept by both so-called host societies and immigrant populations, will gradually change the terms of the debate on immigration" (ibid.: 21).

[141] The Royal Commission for Immigration Policy is the precursor of Unia, the Interfederal Center for Equal Opportunities. It was implemented from 1989 to 1993, the year Unia was founded (Unia 2018).

Society would gradually become aware that labor migration was leading to settlement migration, and the issue of "integration"[142] of these immigrant populations would emerge in the 1980s and the 1990s. Foreign workers were often confronted with difficult working conditions, discrimination, and racism, which led to social movements and demands for better working and living conditions (Kagné 1998). Faced with exclusion from the society in which they settled, these populations' quest for cultural fulfillment helped transform the cultural landscape of European immigration countries like Belgium (Martiniello 2011: 22). While the borders were still officially closed to labor migration, migratory flows to Belgium began to increase and this period saw the emergence of new forms of immigration and the diversification of flows and countries of emigration. Regarding migration from former Belgian colonies and mandates, very few sub-Saharan Africans appear in official registers before World War II. The 1980s marked a significant shift in the presence of sub-Saharan groups of people in Belgium, owing to various factors, most notably a significant increase in the number of asylum applications from various sub-Saharan countries. The 1980s and 1990s marked a multiplication and diversification of migration trajectories for sub-Saharan Africans in Belgium (Kagné and Martiniello 2001: 12). The diversification of migrations is a phenomenon experienced by all European countries of immigration during this time. It is characterized by the desire of migrant individuals to "find a place in society and contribute while legitimately demanding cultural and identity recognition, as well as access to social and economic well-being and a solid legal status" (Martiniello 2011: 23).

To come back to the Rap Against Drugs festival, some of the social difficulties that led to similar protests as those of the municipality of Forest in 1991 were also present in other neighborhoods, including Schaerbeek where the festival took place and where former Mayor Nols had passed "racist and aberrant decrees" (Lapiower 1997: 103). This context pushed the instigators of the event to propose to its young hip hop artist partners that they organize a debate on the presence of drugs in their neighborhoods. Concerts took place before and after the debate and the event ended with the screening of a documentary on the issue (Bastin and Banai 1991: 9-11). I return to analyzing this festival in Chapter 7.

To conclude this first chapter of the empirical analysis, it can be observed firstly that the main themes addressed by the pioneers of Francophone Belgian rap are the same as those that

[142] This concept is one of the most debated and least precise in the debate on the presence of immigrant populations within European societies, with a profusion of definition depending on the mobilized approach (Bousetta 2015).

structured the American hip hop movement when it started to develop: peace and non-violence, positivity and unity, respect and dignity, identity and culture, racism, immigration and belonging in society, but also drugs and criminality. Data from lyrics and interviews with rappers demonstrate that these themes are tailored to the Belgian context, becoming, in a way, for some of them, the foundational principles of the emerging Belgian hip hop movement. This reflects a glocalization phenomenon of hip hop through the reception of these subjects and their articulation in the Belgian context using the artistic disciplines of hip hop and their aesthetic codification. Addressing these issues led to the emergence of explicit forms of political expressions in Francophone Belgian rap music, reminiscent of the calls for social protest found in other significant movements of the time, such as punk or hardcore rock, already present in Belgium (Droussin 2018: n.p.). For instance, as part of his contribution to the editing of an independent newspaper for a not-for-profit youth organization called *Acceuil Jeunes* (Welcome Youth) in the municipality of Saint-Josse-ten-Noode in Brussels, Ali S., graffiti artist and editor-in-chief of the newspaper's issue 7, wrote in July 1993:

> Hip Hop was born in the streets and should stay there. For the moment, Hip Hop in Brussels is lukewarm. Light it up, set the powder keg on fire, it's time to get delirious. Hip Hop has ideological content. Even if its language is provocative, the 'move' claims to be anti-drug, anti-racist, anti-violence, anti-slacker, and asks those who are part of it to educate themselves (Lapiower 1997: 97).

More generally, as Benny B (A. H. Gharbaoui) explained in a 2019 interview, "*Vous êtes fous!*" proceeded as a kind of indicator and facilitator of a desire for expression from a lot of the youth and particularly those in marginalized neighborhoods:

> It wasn't just hip hop, it wasn't just rap, and it wasn't just a musical phenomenon. It went further, it entered into the customs of people and today [...] I understand the message actually and it's true that, speaking of Jacques Martin earlier, when we entered homes through television, I think we allowed all the young people of that time to express what they wanted to say and what they wanted to be. So it was an open door for everyone, for all social classes, all musical genres, all professions, and as a result, we found ourselves in every household, even for those who didn't want to listen to rap.[143]

On the political significance of "*Vous êtes fous!*", Gharbaoui explained in 1994 that he wanted to talk about "the street" in his way while adding he does not "like talking politics":

[143] See *Clique TV* (2019), "Clique Talk : Benny B, Mais Vous Êtes Fou?" (starting from 21:45).

> When people come home after a hard working day, when they turn on the radio, they'd like to listen to some cool stuff, you know, rather than 'yes your mother this and that, politics and slavery'. It's true, you can have hardcore tracks. I did some on my album, on one of the tracks where there's the rage for something (Lapiower 1997: 37).

He continues:

> I never wanted to be seen as a political leader. I'd like people to see us more for what we've done and less for what we are. We're a band, that's all. Ask questions about the music, the lyrics, the live shows. Don't start talking about race and stuff like that, I'm not interested. It's boring. […] It's true that some young people experience racism, but don't they sometimes seek it out? [...] Me, my race is 'young'. We're young people, we have the same problems as everyone else. Eventually, that would be our message. We don't drink, we don't smoke, we're just messing around without this I mean. Always stay positive. Be cool, work hard (ibid.)

Benny B/Gharbaoui avoiding the question of racism in this early 1990s interview is interesting in several points. Firstly, he positions himself as an artist in his own right, who cannot be expected to make any kind of political commitment, since his artistic freedom must be respected. In this way, he positions himself as more of an entertainment artist, while pointing out that his album contains "hardcore" songs, i.e., with clear political messages and demands. Secondly, knowing that he is Belgian with Moroccan origins and considering the specific social and political context of rising racism of the Brussels municipalities where hip hop emerged, the interview can also be interpreted in relation to issues concerning the presence and settlement of groups of people from historical migratory movements in Belgium. Indeed, the early 1990s saw an electoral breakthrough for the far right in Belgium. The elections of November 1991 saw the far right Flemish party *Vlaams Blok* (Flemish Bloc), nowadays renamed *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Interest), rise from two to 12 seats in the House of Representatives, giving insights into the new strategies of far-right European parties. Indeed, "the entire Belgian political class focused excessively on the theme of immigration. Denunciation of the notorious 'immigrant problem' went into overdrive, serving the Flemish far right" (Bellet 1992). This event is known in Belgium as "Black Sunday [*dimanche noir*]" and is said to have indicated a new phase in Belgian politics, marking the end of an era in which the parties traditionally in power were overwhelmingly dominant at the polls (Henne 2021).

Coming back to his 1994 interview with Lapiower, Benny B/Gharbaoui claims to be a member of the "youth race" and thus avoids any potential racialist reading essentializing the hip hop

movement, contrary to certain mainstream media interpretations at this time (see below). Finally, as Lapiower (1997: 38) underlines, Benny B/Gharbaoui acts as a kind of "responsible young person," while a more "radical" fringe of the Francophone hip hop movement is affirming its desire to send out clear political messages, such as BRC. Benny B and BRC joined forces to promote certain founding principles and values of hip hop, such as positivity and working hard. This approach is then reminiscent of that employed by several pioneering hip hop artists, such as the New York groups Brand Nubian and A Tribe Called Quest, who introduced into their own names a certain paradox specific to the contradictions inherent in the very existence of "race" in a postcolonial context. Brand Nubian present themselves as brand new "Nubians" born of hip hop and its multicultural character but using a reference to a specific population of the same name originating in Nubia, which is said to be the origin of Egyptian civilization and the first pharaohs. The members of A Tribe Called Quest, for their part, emphasize a sense of community and group appartenance with the quest of uniting diverse groups of people through their music in order to explore the boundaries of hip hop culture and rap music. In doing so, these groups articulate political discourse and resistance against the racial order established since slavery and colonization.

Chapter 6

Authentic Francophone Belgian rap music? Commercial breach and general media treatment in the early 1990s

Section 1

"Underground" versus "commercial" rap in Brussels: Francophone Belgian reconfiguration of the question of "authenticity" in hip hop

Benny B (A. H. Gharbaoui) opened a commercial and media breach that allowed the hip hop movement to become known to the public in general. As Gharbaoui himself explains:

> Obviously, once we became known, producers were looking for groups and asking young people to rap 'like Benny B', so I understand why some people rebel; producers, on the other hand, are just looking to make a buck. I can understand why some young people said 'Benny B isn't rap'. A lot of people thought that was what French rap was all about, but it was only one possible style (in Lapiower 1997: 36).

This helps to explain the disparagement of Benny B by a large part of the movement at the time, starting with the French group NTM, embodying a tougher, more streetwise fringe of the hip hop movement. In Francophone Belgium, regarding dynamic between "commercial" rap and "real" rap, the crew BRC is considered as embodying a more "real" side of rap music. The present section discusses this point around the notion of authenticity in hip hop.

Remembering that Benny B voluntarily used typical electronic and techno music sounds and instruments to make rap music known in the context of the Belgian music industry of the time and to obtain commercial success, this choice informed much of the criticism of Benny B from the more underground movement, backed by gossip and other animosity from some people (Lapiower 1997: 34). This leads us to explore the notion of authenticity mentioned in the theoretical part of the research, and in the context of hip hop, the notion of "street credibility."

In music subcultures, the differences between "mainstream" and "underground" scenes are important when considering the notion of authenticity. Relating to my hypothesis and considering the notion as being mobilized both in underground creation and mainstream commodification of rap music in Francophone Belgium, I consider that the distinctions between underground and mainstream production of rap music artworks are "context driven and fluid."

I regard the media as an important cultural "disseminator" and "mediator" (Hare and Baker 2017: 2) for qualifying the authenticity of a cultural work. Indeed, with regard to cultural identity and experience in hip hop, the concept of "subcultural capital," derived from Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of "cultural capital" (1979), helps us to consider "means by which young people negotiate and accumulate status within their own social worlds" (Thornton 1995, in Holland 2008: 10) and which they can then convert into economic and/or social capital. Thus, "authenticity is concerned with the organic representation of a subculture" and concretizes when "it rings true or feels real; when it has credibility and comes across as genuine" (Thornton 1995, in Hare and Baker 2017: 2). According to Pennycook (2007: 103), authenticity in hip hop "can be understood not so much as an individualist obsession with the self but rather as a dialogical engagement with community." It is about being true to oneself within cultural and social contexts that connect people to a wider group and help community building.

Such emphasis on authenticity reveals various aspects of urban youth experience and works as a platform for the merging of art, politics, representation, performance, and individual accountability. It can be a celebration of culture, a response to social and economic challenges, a rejection of mainstream capitalism and assimilation, or a means of reclaiming cultural identity (Pennycook 2007). Therefore, authenticity in hip hop involves "establishing ingroup/out-group distinctions" (McLeod 1999, in Hare and Baker 2017: 2), and some shifts in these dynamics can then be highlighted depending on specific contexts.

In Francophone Belgium, Benny B and BRC shared a common discourse of belonging to the UZN. This is unsurprising when remembering that few people were fully involved in hip hop at the time. Daddy K was part of both Benny B and BRC and Defi J from BRC was at the final stage of the casting that led to "*Vous êtes fous!*," just next to Benny B. After the commercial success of Benny B, some critics emerged. He would then embody the "commercial" side of the nascent Belgian local hip hop while BRC would embody, for a while, a more "underground," "real" side. While "authenticity has never been a question of era" (Lapiower 1997: 90), Benny B's choice to incorporate mainstream sounds of the time in the instrumental composition of "*Vous êtes fous!*" raised questions about their authenticity and about whether they could be described as a hip hop group doing rap music.

Indeed, Olivier Verhaege, one of the producers mainly involved in creating "*Vous êtes fous!*," makes the distinction between "commercial" and "real" rap himself after reminding us how he

and his label wanted to "combine a very 'dance', 'club' thing with street rap" when making "*Vous êtes fous!*" (in Lapiower 1997: 31). He explains how Benny B's song and image had to be "fabricated" to give the label's investment any chance of success: "But just because it's manufactured doesn't mean it's not good. We live in a world like that." In the logic of the Private Life Records label, the song had to be structured like a classic vocal song, and the group's image had to be reminiscent of the dance movement, inspiring mostly fun and smiles, and not necessarily "the street" and its darker realities. When Lapiower (1997: 32) asked him whether Gharbaoui's ethnic origins was a problem for the label when it was looking for distribution partnerships for the song, he explained: "Yes, the best proof is that at first the broadcasters didn't want to sign, just because of that. But I had no reservations. I don't attach any importance to that. Above all, the three of them were all smiles."

Verhaege continues by explaining that the label decided to release the song independently, without the support of a larger distribution organization, relying precisely on its dance aspect to get it played in clubs. Subsequently, the label obtained the support of the dance division of CBS (a major label) in France, and once the song began receiving airplay in France, it met with success (Hammou 2014: 97–98). At the same time, BRC released *Stop the Violence*, but, according to Verhaege (in Lapiower 1997: 32), it was not a commercial success: "['*Vous êtes fous!*'] started being a bit played in nightclubs, which just goes to show how important the sound was, it wasn't rap in the strict sense of the word. In fact, his mates [BRC] also released a 'real rap' record at the time, and they didn't sell it." This indicates that the debate surrounding the authenticity of Benny B arose before commercial success. Indeed, the choices made during the final stages of the song's creation were justified by the pursuit of commercial success in the context of the dynamics of the Belgian music market at the time. The aim was not to faithfully represent the principles and practices of the hip hop movement and its whole cultural identity. "*Vous êtes fous!*" is not an organic representation of the Francophone Belgian hip hop youth subculture of the time, although it was the first significant mainstream visibility accorded to it, and fostered development and community building within the nascent movement.

Nevertheless, Benny B/Gharbaoui said, in a 2019 interview, on the group's history:

> We were 100% authentic. […] Even if we've taken the liberty of doing some commercial or even fun tracks, we've always made it a point of honor to do it with everything that had to do with hip hop. Daddy K is a great artist, he's still proving it today, he's one of the best DJs, he

> wasn't a fake, what he did, he did it in 1989, on our scratch albums it's a killer, and we did the job.

He then speaks directly to the journalist who conducted the interview:

> And I'd like to thank you. You've made the point where all the other pseudo-historians of rap have deliberately closed their eyes, and you've made the point because you've understood that in our covers, in our images, in our sounds, in our way of being, there's always a message and a trace that means that today nobody can deny that we were hip hop. We may have been 50% commercial, we may have been 50% hip hop, but we were 100% authentic, and that's a message.[144]

Revisiting the lyrical analysis of "*Vous êtes fous!*" allows us to underline their message, while Gharbaoui returns to the notion of authenticity in the same interview: "You know you have a term that you like a lot, at least in French hip hop circles: it's the word authenticity. Today I'm living proof that I've never been as authentic as I was when I first started out, I still have the same speech." He goes on:

> In fact, at Benny B, we only remembered the music. We wiped out the lyrics with one hand [...] For example, when I went to the producers [at the label Private Life Records], I went with the Public Enemy instrumental and when I rapped my lyrics, the chorus didn't exist, I rapped with rage, I really rapped with rage. So the only thing that changed was that, because we changed the music, I was a little less violent in my rapping, but people only remembered the "*Vous êtes fous!* (You're crazy!)" part of the music and they forgot the whole text [...] and the speech is still the same, which is to make rap and hip hop known so that we can open this door and make it known to everyone, because there's a question that kept coming up in the media, saying: 'Don't you think it's just a fad that's going to go out of fashion?' At the time, if we found any more interviews of us, we'd say: 'Oh no, no! We've opened a breach and it's going to go.'[145]

In a 2022 interview for the same French media, Daddy K echoes this sentiment when referring to the song's lyrics:

> In the text, it was very committed, you see. He denounces the guys who don't want to move, who complain all the time, you know, the cops who check them all the time. It's true that today we almost forget the lyrics, because it's become such a popular, festive song, especially because of the chorus. But when you put Benny's rap on a 100% hip hop sound, you say to yourself:

[144] See *Clique TV* (2019), "Clique Talk : Benny B, Mais Vous Êtes Fou?" (starting from 24:00).
[145] See *Clique TV* (2019), "Clique Talk : Benny B, Mais Vous Êtes Fou?" (starting from 12:25).

> ‘Oh yeah, that’s really the essence of what was on ‘The Message’’ or those other sounds of the time, you know.[146]

Criticism of Benny B’s authenticity and credibility in claiming to be part of the hip hop movement has therefore focused more on the aesthetic aspect of the musical composition itself, as well as on the image of the group fabricated by the label to sell the song. The commercial imperative that underpinned these unorthodox aesthetic choices in rap music at the time was so well concretized that it made the song’s lyrics oblivious to them, even though they are highly representative and parallel to the state of mind of the hip hop movement of the time and what seems to be its cultural, social, and political aspirations and concerns. However, two decades later, we can talk of the rehabilitation of Benny B, as the criticism generated by his commercial success has subsided, giving way to recognition of his achievements in bringing hip hop to the general public and inspiring new vocations.

Although Benny B was considered as embodying the commercial side of nascent Francophone Belgian rap and BRC its more real, underground side, BRC was not exempt from all criticism after they signed an advertising contract with the youth magazine *7 Extra* in the early 1990s. *7 Extra* was a well-known weekly youth magazine in the 1990s. It dealt with entertainment and news relating to pop culture and entertainment in a generalist way. While BRC remained until 1993 “the most advanced and solid ‘non-commercial’ Francophone crew in the country” (Lapiower 1997: 59), and highly sought-after by the sociocultural and associative network, their credibility as representatives of the hip hop underground was impacted by the year-and-a-half-long television broadcasting of a low-budget commercial promoting *7 Extra*. With the arrival of other groups and the redirection of certain members towards other projects, BRC ceased activity. Their work as pioneers of Belgian hip hop, notably through the release of *Stop the Violence*, now belongs to history and memories (*Abcdr du Son* 2023).

The respective careers of Benny B and BRC testify to a Belgian reconfiguration of the question of authenticity in Francophone Belgian rap. The analysis shows that a certain willingness to commercialize rap music in Belgium was decisive in this reconfiguration. Indeed, it was the artistic direction of “*Vous êtes fous!*” that was the main source of Benny B’s commercial qualification, and thus served as an out-group, out-community identity marker in the nascent Francophone Belgian hip hop movement. The initial process of commodification of

[146] See *Clique TV* (2022), “Daddy K : l’origine belge du rap français – Clique Get Busy” (starting from 14:15).

Francophone Belgian rap music to target a mainstream market thus led to a reconfiguration of issues relating to cultural authenticity within the hip hop movement and laid the foundations for tensions between "commercial" and "underground" rap music. In his 2022 interview, after having looked back on the amazing success of Benny B, Daddy K explains:

> We don't understand what's happening to us, we're starting to do all the French TV shows [...] it's a childhood dream that we didn't even imagine [...] we're touring all over France [...] And at the same time, you've got underground rap coming out too […] And it's starting to create a bit of conflict, because quite a few people discovered rap through us and then moved on to other things, and others began to understand that the sound is more hip hop here and less hip hop there, and the image is more credible here and less credible there.[147]

Sear, one of the interviewers (a journalist and director known for his activism in the French hip hop movement), then intervenes to give his opinion on the reception of Benny B's commercial success and issue of street credibility within the Francophone hip hop movement at the time:

> Excuse me, but this needs to be put into context. In France […] French rap is asserting itself. We have a need to be taken seriously because we're just coming out of a period [...] when we were taken for a fad […] And it's true that we're taking it really bad, Benny B. Because for us [...] the whole hip hop movement at the time, and behind it the rap groups trying to break through, we're trying to be taken seriously, to have messages, to have music that's demanding, that's a bit raw. And that's a blow, because everything we're trying to assert, everything we're fighting against, you're somehow endorsing, you're validating it [...] today we welcome you with pleasure because there's an injustice in relation to your legitimacy, your true love of hip hop and all that. But for us it was really difficult.[148]

During a public debate held in 1992 at the Rap Side Stories festival (see Chapter 7), the question of authenticity emerged from exchanges with the audience: "When you want to do something authentic in Belgium, the producers won't let you. They won't put up the money. You have to find parallel niches. I say we can't express ourselves with our words and our music." To which a member of a hip hop collective added:

> We sent one of our bands to RTL to promote the festival. At the rehearsal, they asked us to change the lyrics. We don't give a damn about being on TV or releasing records. What interests us is the street. What we say, what we think, what we see evolving. We're trying to survive, we say what we think, people like us, people don't like us... (*Lezarts Urbains* 1992: 44).

[147] See *Clique TV* (2022), "Daddy K : l'origine belge du rap français – Clique Get Busy" (starting from 25:00).
[148] See *Clique TV* (2022), "Daddy K : l'origine belge du rap français – Clique Get Busy" (starting from 25:00).

This exchange shows the importance of commodification dynamics in these matters, as well as that of the "street" imaginary and symbolism in hip hop, allowing us to highlight how "[t]he terrible discrepancy between the idealistic intentions of the movement (peace, respect...) and the nature of the setting and the actors of hip hop (the street...) produces a permanent tension that explodes at the slightest challenge" (*Lezarts Urbains* 1992: 36). The same debate participant then explained:

> We sing in the street first, that's where young people come to us, that's why we rap. We don't give a damn about radio and all that. We meet our audience on the street. On the radio, they want to make us look like [New Beat] morons [...] We rap because it's our identity. That's what we say. Everything's been taken from us, it's the nature of what we say, our roots. Rap is in our hearts, it's our hearts in rap. What we want to say in the street is that we want to live in a democracy. Here, when you get beaten up for an identity check, that's not democracy. We have to say that (in Lecomte 1992: 82).

Yvette Lecomte, at the time a lifelong education "inspector" in the Federation Wallonia-Brussels (see Chapter 7), attended part of the debate and wrote a carte blanche based on her observation of the event. She concludes by pointing out issues of minorization in the arts:

> Those who socially reject the work of these young people, some of those who exercise their aesthetic criticism, or more often the silence of their criticism, are guilty of refusing to communicate, of not recognizing the artistic productions of these citizens, of obstructing them. And this is so not because of the productions themselves and their qualities, but because they are the work of these people who, by ideological, of course, economic and political nature, have no say in the matter of art. And how can they? (Lecomte 1992: 85).

Section 2

Making it a minority practice: Analytical superficiality and racialization in the general media treatment of the nascent Francophone Belgian hip hop

At the beginning of the previous chapter, I briefly mentioned the treatment of hip hop by the 1984 TV program *H.I.P.H.O.P*. and the ambivalence noted by the French sociologist Hammou. Speaking more specifically about French rap music, Hammou (2014: 27) highlights how the show transformed "implicitly the meaning [of rap music] for many fans by placing it within the larger framework of a hip-hop culture composed of several artistic disciplines." Six years later, Benny B was invited onto the TV show *Le Monde est à vous* [The world is yours], presented by Jacques Martin. At the time, it was one of the most family-friendly shows in the French TV

landscape and it was the first time that a hip hop band had performed on it. As Benny B recalls: "There was this surge of energy when we were on stage. We came in [...] Daddy he killed in windmill, he killed in head spin, we did our Big Daddy Kane choreography, we did somersaults, we put the scratch on. There were all the ingredients of hip-hop culture."[149] Then Jacques Martin did something very unexpected by trying to head spin, while everyone was laughing: "Jacques Martin has just brought [Francophone] rap music into television" (Rousseau 2020). It was in a way the first buzz of Francophone hip hop: "All the TVs are asking which group put Jacques Martin down. The next day we were on all the TVs and radios."[150]

Daddy K insists that the crew wanted to present itself as a hip hop group and not just a rap group. He confirms:

> [Jacques Martin] gets down on the floor and from one day to the next, I promise you, we expected nothing, from one day to the next, we couldn't walk in the street, it was hysteria! Total hysteria, in Belgium as well as in France, we didn't understand anything, it fell on us like that overnight.[151]

He explains then that sales of the single skyrocketed overnight and as a result Benny B was offered other music production contracts. Years later, Benny B explained that he realized that their performance on Jacques Martin's show had symbolic significance: "You had guys who danced, who break, who wore trainers, who had hip hop haircuts and who rapped [...] it was like a breath of fresh air."[152]

It is interesting to look at the treatment of hip hop by mainstream Francophone Belgian media at this time. As mentioned above, RTL TVI, the main Francophone Belgian private TV channel, broadcast a news report about graffiti writing in November 1989. According to Lapiower, this was the "first major appearance" by a self-identified Belgian "hip-hop movement" on the Francophone Belgian media. The report followed several pioneers of the Belgian graffiti scene, including Coke, Crack, Zone, and Shake. François Amant (in Lapiower 1997: 24). The TV reporter involved explained: "Most of all, there are the real graffiti artists, those who make graffiti a way of life. They belong to a broad movement, Hip Hop, which originated in the black

[149] See *Clique TV* (2019), "Clique Talk : Benny B, Mais Vous Êtes Fou?" (starting from 4:50).
[150] See *Clique TV* (2019), "Clique Talk : Benny B, Mais Vous Êtes Fou?" (starting from 5:25).
[151] See *Clique TV* (2022), "Daddy K : l'origine belge du rap français – Clique Get Busy" (starting from 24:00).
[152] See *Diversité sur scènes* (2021), "Emission - Bruxelles Ma Belle avec BENNY B" (starting from 13:30).

districts of New York. They are the ones who do most of the tagging. They are also the ones who create real multi-coloured frescoes, generally executed in the poorer districts of the capital." While breaking was the main entry door to hip hop in the 1980s, graffiti writing and tagging became, in the early 1990s, the "royal way for hip hop" (ibid.: 153), bringing new people into it, at a time of issues with repression from authority and negative media treatment.

Following the huge success of "*Vous êtes fous!*," other media began covering Francophone Belgian hip hop and rap, such as the RTBF, the public-service broadcasting organization of Francophone Belgium. In September 1990, during a TV programme called *Felix*, presented by Erico Salamone, RTBF broadcast a report entitled "Benny B, pioneer of Belgian hip hop." The report focused on Benny B and presented the members of the group in sequences from daily life. We see the band on stage, at the hairdresser, in a sneaker shop, and strolling around their Molenbeek Saint-Jean neighborhood in Brussels. During the sequence at the hairdresser, the interviewer asks A. H. Gharbaoui why the way he looks is so important to him. He explains: "This is the first image of the Zulu, the rapper. It's the haircut, the clothes and all that. As for the haircut, you see, it's a kind of art that you put on your head."[153] This demonstrates again Benny B's commitment to promote hip hop in a way that reflects their original vision and interpretation.

Another interesting aspect to highlight from this report is the introduction given by the RTBF presenter just before the start of the report: "Benny B and not Benny Bé, as some of the capital's fake b-boys might proclaims," then adding: "Know that it's not enough to have a nice jogging suit and 5,000-buck [5,000 Belgian francs or €125 nowadays (excluding inflation)] sneakers to be real [in the hip hop movement]." After this short comment about some "fake" Brussels' b-boys in the emerging Belgian hip hop movement, the presenter comes back to Benny B saying: "Benny B, Daddy K and Perfect are the children of the Zulu Nation, the masters of Hip Hop and French rap on the rise, but don't forget the BRC, the Brussels Rap Convention with Rumky, Defi J and all the others, and believe me, they're cool to please!" He then starts the report by saying himself: "Yo, peace!"[154]

[153] See *Felix* (1990), "Benny B, pionnier du hip hop belge" (starting from 2:10).
[154] See *Felix* (1990), "Benny B, pionnier du hip hop belge" (starting from 0:00).

This first report on Francophone Belgian public television devoted solely to the hip hop movement and Benny B shows the willingness of the program's editors to put the spotlight on a group they consider to be legitimate representatives of the Belgian hip hop movement. This helps to explain why the presenter, who does not appear to be a member of that movement, draws a distinction between "fake" and "real" b-boys. The media treatment here therefore seems different to that used in the RTL TVI report in 1989, which focused on one specific artistic practice from hip hop, graffiti writing, and its illegal and repressive aspect. As well as showing a certain curiosity about the hip hop movement, this RTBF report evokes an emerging distinction in the movement between the "real" and the "fake" and addresses thus the question of authenticity and street credibility in hip hop.

In May 1991, the second edition of the "Brussels Rap Meeting" was held in Brussels at the concert hall Canal Street. Afrika Bambaataa and his band were invited by the organizer of the show, a music producer by the name of Yves Martin who helped record and mix BRC's *Stop the Violence* at Studio Madeleine in Brussels,[155,156] and connected with some Belgian hip hop pioneers. In a newspaper article about the event, rap music is generally presented as "a protest song, a cry against social injustice, an incantation against all 'bastards' in a crude vocabulary that shocked the virtue leagues across the Atlantic. A harsh message from the ghetto. The smell of sulfur emanating from the mal vivre." The article goes on to estimate that there are some 30 amateur rap bands in Brussels, half a dozen of which have a certain notoriety. The practice of rap music is then presented as a response "to social violence" and BRC as a group of "pacifists," whose multi-ethnic background would be a "proof that integration works." Various groups from different countries taking part in the event are then mentioned, and their artistic approach is generalized as follows: "Each group has its own social history, which has found expression in music." A brief comparison is then made to say that while "Brussels rap is more watered-down than its American big brother […] the demands remain. Against racism, drugs and violence. The capital's young rappers often come from underprivileged neighborhoods and encounter problems every day. One friend dies of an overdose, another gets beaten up because of the color of his skin" (Bokhorst 1991: n.p.). Even though this article demonstrates a certain knowledge

[155] Recording studio closed in 2013 and founded in 1965 by Félix Faecq, "Belgian businessperson and music publisher who played an important role in the development of the Belgian Jazz-scene" (see *Discogs*, "Félix Faecq").

[156] See Genius, "BRC – Brussels Rap Convention Volume 1."

of hip hop's sociopolitical and cultural roots, it is nonetheless tinged with a certain superficiality in its analysis, and with certain shortcuts that impact its quality.

> A lively atmosphere at the Cultural Centre Jacques Franck this Saturday and weekend. Tag, rap, hip hop, break dance. The hall is packed. I'm going to try and find out more, people are screaming; lots of groups are taking to the stage one after the other, and I'm going to try and interview them. Brouhaha in the background, we hear the audience 'Yo! Yo! Yo! Yo!' (RTBF 1992: 76).

This is how the RTBF journalist Geneviève Thiriar described her feelings having attended the Rap Side Stories festival (see Chapter 7) in January 1992 in Brussels. In a transcript of interviews with two rap bands conducted during the festival, one member of the first group explained that he started rapping thanks to their local Youth Center (see Chapter 7) despite his young age of 14. When the interviewer asked him about the "signification" of what he is "singing," he explained that he was talking about what happens to him and his friends regarding interactions with police while wishing that life would be "calm" and "simple." The journalist then asked: "Why do you say 'Yo' all the time [in the hip hop movement]?" and he answered: "Benny B took it over from the Americans and everyone's using it now" (RTBF 1992: 76). This brief explanation about the localization of this term coming from global hip hop (which can be understood as "Hi") is another demonstration of Benny B's impact on the Belgian movement. The second group interviewed was H-Posse from Liège (see Chapter 8). Speaking about hip hop music and the means of expression it offers, the crew underlined that "it's music from the streets": "For us, we know what's going on in the street, we just tell people about it" (ibid.: 77).

It is interesting to note that after the explanation gave by H-Posse about the meaning of rap music, the RTBF journalist asked: "There are mainly young immigrants in the room. Is this a type of music and dance that appeals more to young people from the south than to Belgians?" H-Posse answered: "In fact, rap is also a message. A message of peace and unification." To which the interviewer replied: "Yet the music is quite violent," before pointing out that according to them "the most important thing is the lyrics, the message" (RTBF 1992: 77). This conversation highlights again shortcuts and analytical superficiality about how hip hop could be considered by certain journalists from mainstream media at the time. In her first question, the journalist draws a distinction between "young people from the south" and "Belgians," assuming that the former are not part of the latter and are therefore not Belgian, even though

most of these people grew up and spent most of their lives in Belgium. The second question highlights how the aesthetic codifications of most of hip hop music at this time could be considered by those external to its world, while H-Posse underlined the importance of the message of "peace" and "unification" travelling all around the global hip hop nation. These exchanges recall Hammou's (2014) analysis about the media coverage of rap music in France spanning 1981–1991. Indeed, the author highlights one thing in common in these approaches when keeping "rap at a distance, and limit[ing] its audience to a predefined category of the population. In other words, they make rap a minority practice" (ibid.: 83).

In the following part of the interview, the journalist asked for the political content of the message to be explained: "In the end, the message is very political. What is it?" H-Posse then took the opportunity to discuss immigration in Belgium (RTBF 1992: 77):

> It denounces the malaise of society. You said earlier that the audience was mainly made up of immigrants; there is indeed a sense of unease, especially among immigrants, and it's only natural that they should be the ones denouncing all this. So they rap, they're not going to start singing love songs […]
>
> [Another H-Posse member:] I'm from Benin, you know? But I was born here, in Liège. We all went to the same school and we met, they were looking for dancers and as it's also a way for us to have fun, it's not just to denounce. I come to denounce and to dance, we're not mainly revolutionaries. Well, we are, but not in the way the press would understand.

The interviewer asked then: "What are you denouncing?" The group answered: "Violence, racism, drugs, police injustices. Because the police in Liège and Brussels tend to control Black people and Moroccans, even if they haven't done anything." To which the journalist replied: "But you can imagine that this type of music goes hand in hand with drugs. That's more or less the impression that the Belgian population has of it" (ibid.: 77). To which H-Posse replied:

> The press is always talking about thugs. For example, in France, when there were events, they always say it was the Zulus who ransacked Paris and so on. But in fact, originally, a Zulu is a guy who doesn't do drugs or fight, he's a pacifist. And because the press has twisted the story, we use the word 'zulu' as 'vandal' (ibid.: 78).

Insisting on the mainstream media misinterpretation of the term Zulu allows H-Posse to shed light on a process like those highlighted by Hammou when speaking of early French rap. The fact that the journalist associates this type of music with drugs and delinquency in order to

justify potential racial profiling by the police reveals a certain interpretation of the hip hop movement at the time, making its music a practice and a cultural good associated with minority groups. The journalist's comments are underpinned by a racialization dynamic, as the discourse of race is used to categorize certain populations, who are then necessarily responsible for illegal acts and encouraged to commit them by the music targeted at them. The gesture of minorization is made explicit by the denying of the individuality of the mentioned populations and by the external definition that is applied to Belgian rap music, while its pioneers are advocating for consideration of the specific history of this music and the culture from which it comes, to allow for an understanding of all of its aspects.

The journalist asked H-Posse if "Benny B is an idol," which provoked a general burst of laughter in the audience before H-Posse explained:

> Not too much, no. When he first came out with this stuff [i.e., "*Vous êtes fous!*"] ... frankly, I'm not going to say I liked it but I respected him because he'd managed to give a positive image of rap that wasn't all violence and stuff. He'd managed to get older people to like a music they'd never heard before, so we respected him. And then, well, here, when you see him walking around, he's really become a big show-off. He mustn't forget his origins. He comes from poverty, he mustn't start playing the star and rolling around in luxury (RTBF 1992: 78).

People in the audience then entered the debate and one man gave his view on Benny B's rap style: "Why criticize Benny B? Rap can be stupid or intelligent, hypocritical or comical, there's no single definition. It's a way of expressing yourself, that's all. It reflects us" (ibid.: 79).

During a debate bringing together journalists, scholars, cultural center workers, and hip hop artists about "Rap and Hip-Hop Culture in Belgium and the world" organized in 1992 at the Rap Side Stories festival and presented by RTBF host Jacques De Pierpont, E. Salamone, presenter of RTBF's *Felix,* was asked about the recuperation of hip hop by the mainstream media. He explained: "At first, we didn't believe it, we thought it was just a passing fad. We thought it was a media problem, when in fact it's a social problem. Now they've come along, they've said what they had to say and people are after them." This emphasis on rap as a social problem helps to explain why, at the time, "rap was obliged by the outside public to take on a social role" (Schmitz 2017), as I explain in more detail in the following chapter. Thierry Coljon, a music journalist from *Le Soir*—one of the most popular Francophone Belgian newspapers in both Brussels and Wallonia—answered the same question and explained:

> I was asked to take part in this debate after the article I published in my newspaper about the origin and content of the rap movement in the United States, to say that films like *Jungle Fever*, *New Jack City* or *Do the Right Thing* are realistic films. But it's a very different reality from what we're experiencing here.

The transcript of the debate on which I rely for this analysis (*Lezarts Urbains* 1992: 35–48) states: "When the round table changes nature after the speeches of the specialists who will no longer be heard: the debate is in the audience [between the hip hop artists]" (ibid.: 39). The newspaper article mentioned by T. Coljon is entitled: "Black *Haine* White" and was published by *Le Soir* in July 1991. The title is a word game based on two English words ("black" and "white") and a French word ("*haine*", which translates in English as "hate") to evoke a well-known expression in both the English and Francophone worlds: "black and white." This expression can refer either to two things that are opposed a priori or to two things that blend to create a third one. The article begins by stating, "Hip hop rap culture has emerged as the most virulent and popular protest movement that the African-American community has ever known or generated", before stating:

> Rap has gone beyond music to invade all forms of black expression, with the cinema of Spike Lee or the anticrack 'New Jack City', with 'sportswear' [in English in the original text] and fluorescent clothing, and also street art in the form of tags, graffiti and other 'break dances' [in English in the original text], it has its roots in the bebop jazz of the 1940s, African and tropical Afro-Brazilian music of the 1960s and reggae music of the 1970s.

According to him, the common denominator of these cultural forms rests on "the same malaise, the same demands and the same obsessive outbursts (primarily sexual) but also, and above all, to signify an exacerbated racial identity, the rebirth of a pride uniting 'brothers' and 'sisters' around the world." The desire to exacerbate a racial identity would be at the root of rap music and would explain why it would be reserved for members of this "race." He continues:

> The provocative, racist lyrics of rappers such as the most extreme Public Enemy, Ice Cube and Nigger [sic] With Attitude cannot be understood in isolation from the political, social and cultural circumstances that gave rise to them. Added to this is a game in which mercantile compromises are not absent. That said, for the vast majority of African-Americans, the Reagan years were made without them, and it was only natural that the ideas of Martin Luther King should end up being supplanted by the more uncompromising thoughts of Malcolm X, in whom black and mixed-race youth more inclined to violent methods were more likely to recognize themselves. The temptation to go off the rails is as strong as it is easy.

While this latest analysis by Coljon mobilizes certain factual elements regarding the American context in which hip hop emerged, it is nonetheless tinged with a dynamic of racization and categorization of a very important fringe of rap music as racist and violent, assuming that black and colored people would become more comfortable with violence in social struggles due to this music. While they demonstrate a knowledge of black music, hip hop culture and rap music, the journalist's comments reflect a certain condescending attitude towards Francophone Belgian rap of the time and especially a section of its artists and public. For example, when speaking about the success of the French rapper MC Solaar during the early 1990s, Coljon explains in a 1992 article published in *Le Soir* that the latter would have "understood that the future of rap lies in its evolution and *métissage** with other forms of music, and above all in the abandonment of this grotesque attitude. Aptitude rather than attitude, that's his credo." Drawing a parallel with certain "all-too-often justified prejudices" against a part of hip hop culture and rap music, these remarks ultimately reflect a refusal to legitimize rap music as a whole, as if only a part of it had the right to be invoked and could be considered a legitimate cultural practice.

This interpretation of rap music by an outside commentator is therefore interesting for analysis, as it reveals part of the media reading of this cultural movement at the time and certain dynamics tinged with racialization or cultural and artistic delegitimization. Thus, although this commentator demonstrates a knowledge of the political and cultural history of black music and one of its latest creations, rap music, amalgams based on the racization of a part of the American rap music world echo those evoked above from the Rap Side Stories festival debate. Placed in the political context of the time, this kind of amalgam has sometimes given rise to simplistic analyses and ideas about the presence of immigrant communities from North and sub-Saharan Africa, such as the supposedly unwavering solidarity of Muslim immigrants with Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War (Martiniello 1991).

After these initial findings on the premises of the commodification of Belgian rap music and its issues of authenticity, as well as analysis of the media coverage of Francophone Belgian rap at the time via newspaper articles, TV reports, and public debates, I will investigate in the following chapter the use of hip hop as a tool for public action within the youth cultural policy in Francophone Belgium.

Chapter 7

The first uses of hip hop for youth cultural public action in Francophone Belgium

In Francophone Belgium, one specific public policy had a determining role in the development of hip hop. This is called the "youth cultural policy" and is framed by one main legal instrument, the Youth Centre Decree, adopted in 2000 (hereafter the 2000 Decree). This Decree is the core basis of the Youth Sector, a specific sector of the state-subsidized cultural field that is responsible for the implementation of the youth cultural policy of the political authorities of the Federation Wallonia-Brussels. Since work on this research began, the issue of the institutionalization of hip hop as well as its various uses in cultural public action in Francophone Belgium jumped out directly when questioning the history of the movement and the career evolution of many hip hop artists. Hip hop would have then been noted by the Youth Sector for the dynamics, perspectives, and possibilities that it offered regarding the objectives and the purposes of this field of state action aimed at young people. Since then, initiatives, projects, and workshops using hip hop and its artistic disciplines are various and multiple within this state-subsidized cultural field, translating into a significant top-down institutional recognition of some artistic practices of hip hop and "urban cultures" (Genard 2014).

Questioning such practices and dynamics of institutional interventions and public action using hip hop allows us to come back to the reception of the culture and artistic disciplines of hip hop in Belgium and to the initial arguments that favored its integration into the institutionalized organizations and public spaces covered by the analysis. Interesting issues are raised regarding both the implementation of the cultural policies allowing these receptions and uses of hip hop for public action and the effects that these uses would have on the hip hop artists and their artistic practice.

Section 1

Historical contextualization of the youth cultural public policy: The ambitions of sociocultural action in Francophone Belgium

To investigate these issues, I start by reviewing the development of the youth cultural public action in Francophone Belgium to understand why it became interested in hip hop. This helps

in understanding the main issues and the historical context of the emergence of the Youth Sector before talking about the "sociocultural" ambition of such a cultural policy.

Legally speaking and since 1979 (see *Arrêté royal du 1er août 1979*),[157] there are three kinds of not-for-profit organizations considered as "Youth Centers" in Francophone Belgium: the "Youth Clubs," the "Youth Information Centers," and the "Youth Hostels" (Broché 2016: 67–68). The term "Youth Centre" (hereafter YC) is used as a synonym for all three. In 1950, the Statutes of the first Youth Club were published in the *Belgian Official Journal* although it took around 20 years to promulgate the first law defining accreditation criteria for YCs and to organize the growing sector. In 1971, this first legal framework for YCs (see *Arrêté royal du 22 octobre 1971*) allowed those recognized to receive the first regular subventions granted by the state through the concept of "lifelong education" (see Chapter 9), introduced in the preliminary considerations of the law, as well as the notion of "sociocultural action." This law also introduced the most important notion for the aims and objectives of YCs, that of "active, responsible, critical and supportive citizens among the society" or CRACS (Broché 2016: 28, 59, 62–64; Corongiu 2010: 17–18). As one YC coordinator stated at the end of the 1990s: "Since more than thirty years, the aim of shape active, responsible and critical citizens within the society defines like an old slogan the outlines of the activity of [YC]" (Valentin 1999: 18).

At the beginning of the 1980s, there were over a hundred YCs and around 60 more structures could benefit from the agreement between 1980–1999. The specificities of this period can be noted on several levels. Firstly, the 1973 and 1979 oil shocks are often considered as initiators of major economic crises in many countries. Belgium saw a significant rise in unemployment: "In 1983, 12% of the population, including about 32% of young people under 20 and 22% between 20 and 25. In 1993, it was 'only' 10% of the total population, but still concerned 32% of young people under 20 and 20% of 20–25 year olds" (Broché 2016: 154). Belgian political leaders chose to respond to this situation with economic neoliberalism involving "limitation of public spending, financial equilibrium of the social security system, [and] reduction of the overall public sector wage bill". In this "morose" social context:

> Still at the social level, it was during the 1980s that the effects of immigration from North Africa, which began in the 1960s and 1970s, were felt. Urban youth centers had to adapt their practices to this new population, which was essentially underprivileged and culturally more distant from

[157] In Belgium, an *arrêté royal* (royal decree) is a federal governmental act exercising legislation.

> Western references than the Italian and Spanish populations that made up the main waves of previous migration, which were also stigmatized (Broché 2016: 155–156).

During the 1980s and the 1990s, the Youth Sector faced important new issues coming from the public and political interpretations of societal changes. Briefly, this led to a transformation of some core practices in the field of sociocultural and social action directed toward young people in Francophone Belgium. A kind of rivalry emerged between the different services and departments taking charge of the same young individual, particularly during the 1990s with the emergence of the Open Aid Services depending on the politics of Youth Welfare. In this decade, the media and political discourses about insecurity took on a new importance and contributed to the implementations of diverse social interventions and so-called preventive security policies, like the "security contracts,"[158] whose ideological principle is at odds with the project supported by YCs (Mammo and Debras 2008: 35).

This uncoordinated superposition between services and structures targeting the same public led to conflicts, tensions, and competition, which resulted in a failure of understanding and incoherency on the ground: "Youth policies maintain consequently the confusion between cultural policy and inclusion policy, between security policy and preventive policy, between totality and parceling out" (Corongiu 2010: 20). In this difficult context, the 2000 Youth Centre Decree was adopted. It initiated a refinancing of the sector and refocused on the notions and values of lifelong education and active pedagogy, "against any slide of social or security instrumentalization" (ibid.). Indeed, the Decree recognizes the specific work assigned to YCs and clarifies their different scope of activities through sociocultural action. In 2010, there were 193 YCs in Francophone Belgium and in 2019 there were 210 (Corongiu 2010; Broché 2016; Youth Department of the Federation Wallonia-Brussels 2019). At the end of 2023, there were 217 recognized YCs, and over a hundred recognized youth organizations, as well as some 15 recognized training centers for youth workers.[159]

As mentioned, youth policies divided into specific sectors for public action in Francophone Belgium. Mobilizing the notion of "sociocultural action" in this context implies distinguishing

[158] That is, financing tools created in 1992 for the development of local projects aimed mainly at fighting against the "feeling of insecurity" and "petty crime" (Strebelle 2022). The Ministry of the Interior's crime prevention policy aims to "develop an integrated approach, involving all the players involved in or supporting prevention, namely local, regional, community and federal authorities" (BeFUS 2021).

[159] See Youth Department (2023), "Trouver une association de jeunesse."

between youth social policies and youth cultural policies. The term "sociocultural action" can be ambiguous. This part of the research aims to grasp what it involves for the Youth Sector.

In Francophone Belgium, cultural policies developed during the 1960s and the 1970s. Youth policy emerged from "a frame of reference of dialectic even of bringing into opposition cultural democratization and cultural democracy" (Genard 2014: 2–4). In this frame, the purpose was to try to open the meaning of the word "culture" through inclusion and an institutional recognition of other cultural expressions than those historically legitimized at this time (Zask 2016). The necessity was to subsidize and organize universal access to cultural goods and artworks in public or private institutions (e.g., museums, theatres, libraries, exhibitions, musical stages) and cultural production (i.e., the possibility and ability to produce artworks and cultural goods). According to advocates, the objective was no longer merely a "passive cultural action," but rather an "active sociocultural" one through lifelong education and sociocultural development, as the notion of CRACS is supposed to translate. Article 1 of the 2000 Decree enshrines the promotion and development of "active, responsible, critical and supportive citizens (CRACS) among the society" as the primary objective of YCs. Article 4 of the 2009 Youth Organization Decree (see Chapter 11) enshrines the aims of such organizations, among which are "to foster the development of responsible, active, critical and supportive citizenship among young people through awareness and knowledge of social realities, attitudes of responsibility and active participation in social, economic, cultural and political life as well as the implementation and promotion of sociocultural and Lifelong Education." As the coordinator of a Brussels YC highlights: "These terms […] resume both the aims of our institution, the working areas of our team and our ethical even philosophical positioning in relation to youth" (Balfroid 2011: 57).

Jean-Louis Genard (2014: 3) highlights a kind of "dual process" behind the new orientation given to the youth cultural policy after May 68: "A process of dehierarchisation of cultural values [and] an anthropological presupposition, central to the social movements of May 68, according to which everyone is potentially creative as long as they are given the opportunity to express themselves." The first legal framework organizing the YCs was adopted in this spirit and is still the core basis of the 2000 Decree (Broché 2016). The ambitions of sociocultural action directed toward youth in Francophone Belgium is then crystalized in the notion of the so-called CRACS, rooted in the legal instruments framing the Youth Sector and fostering the development of responsible, active, critical, and supportive citizens. However: "Such a project

cannot in fact be reserved only for the excluded and vulnerable, which would imply that for others this citizenship would be acquired in advance" (Youth Department of the Federation Wallonia-Brussels 2013: 10). This helps to understand the contours of "sociocultural action" in Francophone Belgium. It is an action aimed at the entire population while historically developed on the purpose of guaranteeing access to culture for disadvantaged groups and fighting social exclusion by bringing "cultural expression to populations that had not had the opportunity to do so until then or whose cultural expressions had been the subject of indifference, if not stigmatization" (Genard 2014: 4).

Community and individuality appear therefore as intrinsically linked to the sociocultural project of a YC. Notions of identity and individuality are at the heart of the CRACS project. A study carried out in 1990–1991 involving some 50 YCs and published in 1992 by the Youth Department highlighted the main expected developments in the sector during that decade. The study's conclusion insists: "It is essential to focus on young people's individual projects, in order to restore the participatory impetus that will enable them to improve their own social conditions." Two general trends emerged from the survey results: a tendency towards "participatory ideology," and another towards "social marketing." The first tendency is concerned with the recognition of young people as full citizens with their own perspectives, experiences, and difficulties. The second tendency focuses on realizing young people's personal projects and aims to adjust the offer of activities in YCs to the wishes of young people. It is a service- and customer-oriented approach that can be understood in the context of "modern socialization ideals centred on personal fulfilment" (ULB 1992: 41), meaning that YCs need to be able to meet the various demands of a young audience consuming the activities on offer.

While advocates of the participatory ideology trend in sociocultural work give priority to "young people from disadvantaged backgrounds," the latter are also targeted by the social marketing trend, which considers that the "new socialization through individual consumption of leisure activities is all the more attractive because, for a growing number of young people, social living conditions are difficult and their opportunities for professional integration are reduced" (ULB 1992: 41). Finally, with the aim of developing a cultural policy addressing individual problems through collective approaches and building on young people's identity, the study argues for overcoming the contradiction between the two trends of participatory ideology and social marketing: "When decompartmentalized, these two approaches contain so many perfectly compatible elements that they can reinforce each other. Paradoxical though it may be,

such an integration can offer a new opportunity for an updated youth policy to remain faithful to its objectives of lifelong education" (ibid.: 56). The sociocultural character of daily work in Francophone Belgian YCs, understood within a broader framework of lifelong education, would therefore be broken down into several similar approaches that can be balanced. I will explain later how sociocultural action can be articulated with various projects involving hip hop.

These developments allow for a better understanding of the reasons behind the reception of hip hop in the youth cultural organizations considering the sociocultural ambition to be "the ideal can-opener for clearing out the gaps, enabling young people to force their way through and find a place in this society" (Chambeau 2015: 4). Indeed, this network played an important role in the emergence and perpetuation of hip hop in the country. As Lapiower, former director of Lezarts Urbains, explained during our interview, hip hop culture was quickly noted by the Youth Sector for the dynamics, perspectives, and possibilities that it offered regarding its objectives around lifelong education, sociocultural action, and cultural democracy (*Lezarts Urbains* 2000: 108; Broché 2016). This reflects key achievements of research on hip hop pedagogy about considering hip hop culture as a set of practices and network formations rather than simply as cultural goods. This kind of "underlying theory" of hip hop has "influenced much of what scholars refer to as identity formation and self-cultivation," knowing that "forums of Hip Hop outside of the school proper can function as alternatives spaces of education" (Pardue 2013: 138–139). HHBE states that "Hip-hop culture is a framework that informs how youth interpret, represent, and negotiate aspects of their sociocultural identities" (Low et al. 2013: 119). From a view of culture and education as personal and social development, this reading grid of hip hop perfectly suited for identity formation and self-cultivation relates to the core basis of the sociocultural action developed within the Francophone Belgian Youth Sector.

When I asked Lapiower why the Youth Sector became interested in hip hop as soon as it arrived in Belgium, he highlighted the "sociological composition" of hip hop and especially rap music: "It quickly became obvious that the emergence of rap in Belgium had a very social motivation," while it is also "obvious that hip hop [in Belgium] in the early years […] was ignored from the [institutionalized] cultural sphere." Thus, "very quickly, it was the neighborhood houses, the youth centers that were the first interlocutors, the first places where [...] one could find a scene, find help as well" (Lapiower 2017: n.p.). John (2021: n.p.), a worker at the youth organization For'J, also related to this:

> Before, there was a lot of rock in MJ, and we were afraid to go towards something else, and we were a bit afraid of the hip hop movement, because the bases are the rough neighborhoods, the people in the street, the riffraff. Because I'm basically a graffiti artist, and even as a graffiti artist, you're still considered a vandal, and when MJ opened up to hip hop, it opened doors for a lot of people. It allowed young people to do free stuff and structure it all, and create projects, and for the MJ, it's allowed them to get young people to come. So, these two movements have been linked together for 40 years, and I don't think one goes without the other.

With regard to the broader field of cultural policies in Francophone Belgium, one of the major current issues relates to "[h]ow to think today, with regard to the most neglected urban populations, a cultural policy which can ensure the recognition and the spawning of the capacities and talents that incubate and wriggle among it" (Genard 2014: 11).

Section 2

Premises of the institutionalization of hip hop arts and culture for sociocultural public action in Francophone Belgium

In this section, I present examples of the first uses of hip hop within the Youth Sector, before expanding this analysis with the help of the "street-level bureaucracy" analytical framework and starting by youth sociocultural projects implemented in the YC Thier-à-Liège. While other public activities and workshops around hip hop had been organized before,[160] the Rap Against Drugs festival in July 1991 was one of the first examples of hip hop being used for public action involving both Belgian hip hop pioneers in the organization and a YC. A few months later, in January 1992, the festival Rap Side Stories would be the first festival on a major scale, mainly organized by youth organizations and hip hop artists working on projects with them.

Subsection 1: The Rap Against Drugs festival (1991)

Held at Les Halles de Schaerbeek,[161] the Rap Against Drugs festival was organized in July 1991 and brought together actors with diverse profiles and motivations. Chapter 5 will explain how BRC delivered a message of peace and positivity in relation to the social context experienced in certain districts of Brussels and Schaerbeek. The rapper Rayer, for example, performed his song "Peace in the World" on stage. The S Connection, an organization involved in the hip hop

[160] For instance, the YC Vitamine Z and the local Cultural Center in the region of Walloon Brabant (near Brussels) organized a rap workshop in spring 1991 led by BRC (*Le Soir* 1991).

[161] A Cultural Center located in the municipality of Schaerbeek since the early 1970s. Many hip hop events have been and are still being held there (see *Les Halles de Schaerbeek* (2024), "Missions et historiques").

movement, co-organized the event (Lapiower 1992: 2). Taking advantage of Warner Bros. wanting to promote the movie *New Jack City* (1991), with the rapper Ice T and in which one of the main themes is the trafficking and consumption of hard drugs coupled with social misery, the group, with the help of associations and public authorities, had the idea of creating a rap event around this theme. In an "explosive context" marked by recent "riots" and political initiatives tinged with xenophobia and racism, a rap music video featuring "all the hardcore Belgian Hip Hop of the moment" was produced and shown in cinemas across the country. In the clip, certain hip hop artists wear a t-shirt decorated with Arabic calligraphy, as an answer to the sociopolitical context of the time in Schaerbeek (Lapiower 1997: 103). The festival was attended by over 400 people, mostly young people from Schaerbeek and other municipalities. It comprised a concert featuring 12 bands divided into two parts, between which a "debate-conversation" with a panel and the audience on the presence of drugs and other problems in Schaerbeek was held. The conversation was moderated by the RTBF journalist Françoise Wolff, accompanied by Salhi from BRC and Schuk from the Stalag YC in Schaerbeek.

The Stalag YC has an interesting history. In April 1991, Schaerbeek Municipal College decided to move the municipal YC to another location for reasons of building insalubrity. However, the same college decided in December 1991 to close this new location, invoking the same reasons of insalubrity. Young people attending the YC were disappointed, as three of its active members explained to *Le Soir*: "We wanted to try something in Schaerbeek, to create trust between the elderly, the police and ourselves. All we asked was for the municipality to give us a helping hand. But they wouldn't even do that." According to journalists at *Le Soir* who followed the case, the situation demonstrated that social dialogue in the Schaerbeek municipality was not being implemented and was avoided by certain local authorities who did not want to help in promoting a positive image of immigrant populations:

> Schaerbeek has locked itself away in superb, comfortable isolation. It does not know the virtues of dialogue. Now its leaders discover young immigrants who do not fit in with what they see as the usual characteristics of immigration: they want to do things, to establish a new climate in the municipality, to improve their relations with the elderly, with the police, to avoid confrontation. Dangerous, for the hawks [some members of the municipal majority]: to accept a dialogue with these immigrants is to clip one's wings or fly into another sky (in Robert and Vantroyen 1991: n.p.).

The issue of "integration" of immigrant populations (see above) is then at stake while the evolution of European and Belgian public debate shows the gradual shift from a "multiculturalist"[162] integration strategy to a more "assimilationist"[163] approach (Gossiaux et al. 2019: 26). The self-management of the Stalag YC, "entirely conceived and composed by young people from the population it claimed to defend and know – North African immigrants" (Lapiower 1997: 103), helps to explain the municipal college's slowness in reallocating facilities to the young people who were leading the Stalag YC. Indeed, while the municipal majority at the time refused to work with the Royal Commission for Immigration Policy to refurbish the building with public subsidies (Robert 1992), the hip hop artists from the Stalag YC were seeking "to pass on values [of the hip hop movement], transform negative rage into creative rage, and not remain stuck in a state of inward-looking withdrawal," as explained by the graffiti artist Dema (in Vanoussis 2010: 11). At the end of 1992, following a change in the local government, a solution was found to provide a YC for the youth of Schaerbeek. In return, their supervision had to respond to the ideology of security and crime prevention embodied in the security contracts system, thus running counter to the sociocultural approach promoted by the Youth Sector (Robert 1992). During a semi-structured interview with the Brussels-based organization Bruxelles Panthères about the colonial roots of contemporary racism in Belgium, Mouhad Reghif, one of the organization's spokespeople, explained that he had experienced first-hand the introduction of security contracts and the evolution of some political discourse on North African and sub-Saharan African immigration in Belgium in the 1980s and 1990s: "They presented us as savages in their discourse. At the time, we didn't say 'Islamist', we didn't say 'Muslim', we said 'North African', 'Moroccan immigrant'. Because before you were naturalized, you were Moroccan" (Reghif 2023: n.p.).

[162] Multiculturalism is commonly described as "the coexistence of several cultures in the same national (or local) space, with the aim of creating social links within the framework of a democratic regime" (Ghorra-Gobin 2006: 5). The aim of this political orientation is to ensure that state organizations take diversity into account. The public expression of cultural, religious, and identity specificities is then legally or politically recognized, or at least tolerated. From then on, "individuals and groups are free to organize themselves to preserve their culture and identity while respecting the law" (Martiniello 2011: 70).

[163] Assimilation—or the imposition of norms, practices, and values on immigrant people—is a social process of behavioral convergence that takes place in an asymmetrical relationship between the host society and the newcomers. The assimilationist model of integration for immigrants and national minority groups requires these populations to blend into the majority society and become "invisible through a unilateral process of adaptation or cultural or identity conformity." For them, this implies "abandoning their cultural characteristics and identities to adopt unreservedly, in the public arena at least, the cultural patterns and behaviors specific to and defined by the majority" (Martiniello 2011: 68).

Following the festival, *Infor-Drogues* wrote an article explaining that the aim and issue for the public structures involved was "reaching out to young people and meeting them on their 'home ground'." Indeed, "circles that mostly ignore each other have met and started talking to each other" by using rap music to appeal to the targeted youth by recognizing it in its own cultural identity. Finally, they highlighted that the youth "felt recognized and supported in their desire to react to misery, boredom, failure and despair because it is up to them to develop their own values, through music or any other form of expression" (Bastin and Banai 1991: 11). Another interesting element is the brief description of the hip hop movement presented at the beginning of the article. While it reflects a desire to provide accurate and objective information, some lines reveal a lack of knowledge and a misunderstanding of rap music and its cultural-political heritage, and of certain aspects and/or sub-genres of it: "While one part of the very popular rap scene has become more anodyne and recuperated [...], the other remains highly politicized and committed. Some groups conveying racist messages against white people or advocating violence as a solution, such as the Black Panthers and Malcolm X" (ibid.: 7). These thoughts, based on the above-mentioned article by Coljon (1991), as shown by the references quoted in the *Infor-Drogues* piece, give further examples of the caricatures, simplifications, and amalgams that Belgian hip hop could face at the time.

Remembering that the hip hop artists wanted to participate in the event in order to spread a positive message of peace and unity related to the context of their municipality, marked by national debates on migratory issues and the racist views and attitudes of some politicians and police officers (Jaumain and Vaesen 2022: 5), it is notable that the conversation did not focus solely on the issue of drugs. Related themes such as police repression, racism, social exclusion, and living conditions were discussed by the youth in the audience (Bastin and Banai 1991: 10). The festival succeeded in bringing together several actors with different profiles and interests with hip hop as common ground, giving thus an example of its use as a tool for achieving public action directly involving the Youth Sector.

Subsection 2: The Rap Side Stories festival (1992)

The Rap Side Stories festival (1992) was one of the first major hip hop festivals in Belgium (*Futurgrooves* 2022). It was held at the Cultural Center Jacques Franck in the municipality of Saint-Gilles in Brussels in January 1992, at the initiative of the Foundation Jacques Gueux (nowadays Lezarts Urbains; see Chapter 9) in co-production with the Cultural Center and the

Local Mission of Saint-Gilles, a not-for-profit social and employment integration organization. Considered by the organizers to be "a major event in the cultural and social life of Brussels," the festival brought together "under the banner of hip hop, hundreds of teenagers, mostly from immigrant backgrounds, who warmly testified to their ability to invent forms of cultural response to social exclusion" (*Lezarts Urbains* 1992: 6). It was also the first symposium in Francophone Belgium to focus on hip hop and resulted in a publication about its sociocultural dimensions, edited by Lezarts Urbains in 1992 (*Le Soir* 1992).

The festival was held over two days, Saturday January 18 and Sunday January 19, and included various graffiti and dance workshops, exhibitions, screenings, and graffiti creations, as well as a "Graffitis-Tour" around Brussels, debates, rap and dance performances, and as screenings of some music videos, a documentary, and a film. As explained by Lapiower, one of the main organizers, the idea was to gather the whole movement in one place, allowing it "to express itself as it is, so that we can discover it" (*Lezarts Urbains* 1992: 15). The gathering was intended to be authentic, but open to the curious. The choice of the place, the Cultural Center Jacques Franck, was intended "to show everyone, both spectators and creators, that culture, even street culture, has its own place in a Cultural Center" (ibid.: 16). In addition to groups that had already acquired a certain recognition in the movement, such as BRC, S Connection, and RAB (see below), some posses from other towns (Mons, Namur, Ghent, Paris) as well as many groups from Francophone YCs participated. Among them was H-Posse from Liège (see below). The strong presence of YCs from regions other than Brussels was made possible by the Youth Centers Federations, which promoted the festival among its member organizations, in particular the Youth Centers Federation in Francophone Belgium, the largest YC Federation in Belgium (see below).

In a context in which the Belgian hip hop movement was still in its infancy and did not have the same opportunities to perform as those available in France, the Rap Side Stories festival was undoubtedly a creative success, as well as a social and cultural one. It crystallized the beginnings of the institutionalization of hip hop within, first and foremost, the youth cultural policy and its implementing sector in Francophone Belgium. Moreover, being also the first symposium about the hip hop movement in Belgium, it brought together professional profiles other than those of the sociocultural sector. It received media coverage, with several articles in the Belgian Francophone newspaper *Le Soir*. One of these outlined what was at stake:

> Hip Hop culture is part of a chain whose links unite Harlem, Vaulx-en-Velin [municipality in the French city of Lyon], Schaerbeek, Molenbeek and Forest. The aim of the symposium is to take street culture seriously, without taking itself too seriously. The challenge is daring. So is the subject. As for the audience, it will come in large numbers from Youth Centers and bands (Couvreur 1992).

Georges Lapassade, a French sociologist, lecturer at the University of Paris 8 at the time, author with P. Rousselot[164] of *Le rap ou la fureur de dire* [1998] in 1990,[165] was present. During the debate, after having recalled the American origins of this culture and its artistic practices, he underlined "the social basis of the movement": "In the hip hop movement, there's an ethnic mix, but there's still a root that comes from immigration. Here, for example, I have the impression that the hip hop phenomenon is rooted more in immigrant neighborhoods [...] In Paris, that's what's happening in hip hop" (in *Lezarts Urbains* 1992: 38). Going over the question of organizing hip hop arts workshops and courses in YCs, he points out the "paradoxical" nature of organizing rap workshops, given that rap is "a spontaneous form of expression that takes place in the streets," before explaining that sociocultural workers seek to identify the interests and the mode of expression of the youth in order to reach the main goals of YCs (in *Lezarts Urbains* 1992: 38).

Three months after the festival, Lapiower interviewed Defi J from BRC to get his analysis of it. The interview was transcribed in the collective book edited by Lezarts Urbains that followed the festival. On the issue of the place of hip hop in a public (state-subsidized) Cultural Center, Salhy explained:

> Rap could enter the Cultural Center, but then with a room designed for this kind of event. In my opinion, rap is basically too hard [in English in the original quote], it's 'give it all you've got', you know? The idea was positive. Disciplined people might have accepted the proposed conditions, but too many came to show off. The good thing was that, alongside rap and graffiti, for once dance was valued (in Lezarts Urbains 1992: 74).

Indeed, while the festival was a success in reaching its primary objectives, there was agitation in the audience following certain performances, screenings, or during the first debate,

[164] Who participated in the first debate of the festival about the issue of trying to define hip hop culture.

[165] In the early 1990s, G. Lapassade initiated a project to bring hip hop culture to the Université Paris 8, by asking certain French pioneers to take part as lecturers or guest lecturers, and by giving them space to express themselves within the university. Thus, a sort of creative hip hop laboratory was set up for five years within a French academic institution. In 2022, the Arte media devoted an audiovisual report to the project (see "Paris 8 – La Fac Hip-Hop").

particularly when evoking Benny B who was absent from the event: "Most of the time, it was a question of distancing oneself from it or dragging it in the mud, but the name of Benny B was indeed the most pronounced artist name of the festival" (ibid.: 23). This was especially the case since the organizers had irritated Benny B's fans by choosing BRC as headliner.

Defi J (in Lezarts Urbains 1992: 72) underlines the initiative of the festival itself, as this kind of event was unheard of in Brussels at the time, but regrets a certain

> misunderstanding on the part of the B Boys amongst themselves [who] wasted their time talking about 'other people' when we should have been talking about hip hop and its evolution in relation to us […] We had to talk about ourselves and give hip hop a good image, but I think we gave a bad image and the media took advantage of it to bury us. Or to attribute hip hop to people who do commercial things. I also think the press did a bad job.

Looking at the newspaper articles published about the festival at the time, we note that journalists who attended discussed the institutionalization of such a culture, drawing parallels with the hippie movement in the US and the May 68 movement in France. For example, when discussing the idea of hiring graffiti artists to decorate metro stations rather than spending tens of millions annually on cleaning, one of the journalists points to the risk of the movement becoming outdated as a protest expression. Another is much more hostile to institutionalized initiatives around hip hop:

> Some people are convinced that rock died the day it entered the Cultural Centers and began to be the subject of colloquia. All it takes is for the term 'culture' to be attached to any movement that is even remotely spontaneous, and it suffocates in its own complacency. Brussels discovers the extent of the Hip Hop wave, and like birds of prey full of clumsy good intentions, the social assistants of our society's new currents, gathered in foundations and not-for-profit organizations, act as paternalistic post-Sixties analysts (in Couvreur and Coljon 1992: n.p.).

He is equally critical of how the event unfolded and how the debates turned out: "As silent witnesses, we witnessed a fine demonstration of intolerance and adolescent stupidity from rappers who take themselves as seriously as they can and, for the most part, don't know how to do anything other than adopt an attitude and look as natural as the New Kids on the Block [an American boy band]" (in Couvreur and Coljon 1992: n.p.). These condescending remarks led to the same conclusion, which many of those actively involved in the event regretted: that the main debate did not really take place where it was supposed to. Indeed, the main challenge of

the Rap Side Stories festival was to define the Belgian hip hop movement at a time when the premises of its institutionalization within the scope of the youth cultural policy were taking shape in Francophone Belgium. In the end, it was the issues of institutionalization, and hence cultural legitimization, and the commodification of the movement, expressing fears of commercial recuperation, that came to the fore following this first major hip hop event in Brussels. Drawing out some "fundamental features" of this overview of the hip hop movement during the festival, Lapiower highlights:

> Above all, it's the divisions, mistrust and sometimes aggressiveness that shine through, rather than the ability and desire to confront the establishment. The ideological essence of hip hop was originally conceived as being very non-violent and unifying, and the permanent discrepancy between an almost religious discourse and harsh reality disturbed more than one B. Boy. Seen from a distance, for me these truths only reflect the multiplicity and social or cultural complexity of a teenage movement. Isn't this frank, slightly crude observation preferable to the all-too-seductive lyrical flights of fancy our generations have gone through? (*Lezarts Urbains* 1992: 32).

The analysis of this event proves interesting for the research as it highlights and explores two dynamics that will prove fundamental to the development of hip hop in Francophone Belgium: its legitimization and its cultural industrialization. While these dynamics are not specific to hip hop, they are articulated here within the framework of a specific sociopolitical reading of hip hop, which Kosmic summed up during his dance show at the Rap Side Stories festival: "We are all in the same shit! [in English in the original quote] We are all in the same shit! [in French in the original quote] Black, White, Yellow and we are all doing rap!" (in *Lezarts Urbains* 1992: 30). This leads to the second part of the empirical analysis, covering the period 1993–2007, when hip hop developed steadily in Francophone Belgium, always looking for new opportunities to create and perform. Before that, I propose to revisit the theoretical foundations that underpin the principal guidelines of the thesis in relation to the empirical developments so far.

Section 3

Theoretical feedback (1984-1992): Shaping and affirming cultural identity: Local appropriation of rap music for the global dialogue of marginalized voices in Francophone Belgium

Considering that rap music and hip hop culture develop within a particularly racialized framework, I question how Francophone Belgian rap music could address issues of racism and racialization within a certain political consciousness central to the framing of these representations.

The first part of the chronological empirical analysis shows primarily that the artistic corpus of Francophone Belgian rap music from this period is strongly linked to the social and political context relating to issues of immigration, multiculturalism, racism and racial discrimination at the time. The glocalization dynamics analyzed in this part reveal how the generation of these hip hop pioneers shared and/or were sensitized to experiences of racial discrimination from the postcolonial black American condition. They identified with and drew inspiration from the cultural and sociopolitical narratives and symbols of resistance to dominant cultural models and systems of oppression of minority groups disseminated by rap music and hip hop culture. Therefore, this Francophone Belgian local appropriation of the resistance narrative of American rap music attests to a transatlantic intercultural circulation in Belgium of politico-cultural symbolism stemming from popular "black music." Francophone Belgian hip hop thus emerged mainly in immigrant and socio-economically disadvantaged environments, which saw in hip hop a protest dimension emerging from a social context of racial and classist discrimination in which they perceived certain similarities to their own life experience in postcolonial Belgium. A transcultural and global dialogue arrives at a new social context. In this way, racial discrimination in Francophone Belgium was strongly contested, criticized, and deconstructed in the rap music produced at the time, so that it could participate in this dialogue through analysis and positioning based on the local sociopolitical context.

Since hip hop's cultural identity has been strongly constructed as a commentary or denunciation of current relations of power and domination, it is thus once again perceived here as a culture of resistance with a political dimension, and as the expression of a struggle to find one's place in society. These initial developments of the Francophone Belgian rap scene show how, by investing in hip hop mind, culture, and rap music, this generation is seeking a certain affirmation

and recognition of its own identity, in response to social and economic exclusion and cultural and identity marginalization.

By doing so, these pioneers of Belgian hip hop could be seen as "organic intellectuals" in the sense defined by Gramsci (204 [1932]). Indeed, the author theorizes a critique of the social distinction between "intellectual work" and "manual labor" by defining the notion of intellectuals not based on technicalities specific to work carried out in a particular context but rather based on the role and function performed by those who invest in this work. As such, he develops the concept of organic intellectuals, which refers to individuals from a particular class or social group who express their interests and contribute to developing a kind of class consciousness that can challenge the dominant ideology. The idea is that each social group can produce its own organic intellectuals, who are deeply rooted in the experiences of their own group and play a decisive role in organizing and mobilizing it in favor of political and social change.[166] Thus, when these pioneers of the Belgian hip hop movement explain the work they did to localize this culture and its artistic forms in their cultural and sociopolitical context, and when some of them specify that "we were not just discovering; we were researching!," they have taken on the role of organic intellectuals whose main function was to disseminate and develop hip hop in Francophone Belgium, as received and localized as a platform of resistance and a tool for cultural and political protest against dominant models, and for future generations of this nascent social movement.

Besides denying or being resistant to the dominant cultural model in the Belgian national configuration, rap music and hip hop culture appear as parallel networks, a third space enabling individuals to pursue alternative forms of legitimacy by affirming their cultural identity built around imagined connections and global solidarity among diverse populations around the world experiencing discrimination and inequalities. Through the practice of hip hop and rap music, young, marginalized voices allow themselves to participate in the shaping and the development of culture in Francophone Belgium. This third space also allows us to approach and connect with people other than those met in one's daily environment. This seems to provide a means of breaking free from certain predetermined categories to encourage a gathering in a single

[166] "Each social group, emerging in the territory where it originated from an essential function in the world of economic production, organically creates one or more classes of intellectuals who give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic domain, but also in the social and political space" (Gramsci 2024 [1932]: 80).

symbolic and material space, that of hip hop. As one interviewee said: “Opening perspectives is not opening the skull.”

Having quickly spotted the potential offered by the highly creative hip hop protest energy, a few actors in the Belgian music industry took an interest in rap music in the early 1990s and co-produced the first Francophone rap music hit. Consequently, the first tensions between cultural authenticity (socially conscious or underground rap) and commercial commodification (party or commercial rap) emerged within the nascent Francophone Belgian rap scene. This emergence attested to a reconfiguration of issues, subtleties, and nuances related to street credibility and the fear of commercial recuperation in Francophone Belgian rap music, with artists identified as more commercial or more underground, each claiming the hip hop mind and the founding authenticity of the song “The Message.” As immigrant groups in Francophone Belgium played a decisive role in the local appropriation of hip hop, the general media treatment of it may have been tinged with gestures of minorization and mechanisms of racization. Such a dynamic lays the ground for making Francophone Belgian rap music a minority practice designed for a predefined category of the Belgian population assigned to a dominated position. Francophone Belgian rap music would then appear as a cultural good associated with minority groups.

People in charge of implementing youth cultural policy in Francophone Belgium have also taken an interest in rap music and hip hop culture. The beginnings of hip hop’s institutionalization within this public policy sector can be explained by the desire to make use of hip hop’s protest narrative for the purposes of sociocultural action. Therefore, the issue of recognizing the hip hop arts as legitimate artistic disciplines was soon raised, and certain artists quickly began to assert their desire for professionalization, in order to affirm and protect their right to have a say in the arts and cultural matter in Belgium.

Empirical analysis: 1993-2007

Chapter 8
The emergence of a flourishing underground Francophone Belgian rap music scene in the 1990s

The period from the 1980s to 1992 represents the glocalization and appropriation of hip hop culture and rap music in Francophone Belgium. I have selected 1992 and 1993 as the turning points between this period and the one analyzed in the following part because 1992 was the year of the first major event for the Francophone Belgian hip hop movement, while 1993 saw the release of the first rap album produced in Wallonia (in the city of Liège), called *Fidèles au vinyl* [*Loyal to Vinyl*].

Section 1
Developing hip hop arts and culture outside of Brussels

In 1993, a Francophone Belgian rap compilation entitled *Fidèles au vinyl* [*Loyal to Vinyl*] was released in Liège and featured several songs with rappers from the crew H-Posse (who would become Starflam a few years later) who used to practice within the YC Thier-à-Liège (see Chapter 9). With a series of rappers from cities other than Brussels, the release of this compilation crystallizes the beginnings of a solid development of hip hop throughout Francophone Belgium. This occurs in a context where "it wasn't easy to find plans to play in Brussels," as Etienne Droussin, coordinator of the YC Thier-à-Liège, explained during a semi-structured interview. Recalling the Rap Side Stories festival in which H-Posse took part, he explains:

> At the time, rap was mainly a Brussels thing. The organizers had phoned all the YCs in Wallonia to see if we had any groups, if we had any graffiti, but at the same time considering that we were in danger of arriving with a sort of by-product. We were already ranked a bit below Brussels, you know (2018: n.p.).

The present chapter discusses the development of a flourishing underground hip hop and rap music scene in Francophone Belgium in parallel with the concept of the art world as developed by Howard Becker. I analyze the positioning of this "art world" in relation to issues of racism as formulated in the theoretical framework.

In "*Les princes-évêques*" ["The Princes Bishops"] by the rapper Seg and DJ Mig One (members of H-Posse), released on *Fidèles au vinyl*, Seg affirms their belonging to the Liège region while asserting their commitment to fight injustices committed by political authorities:

[Verse 1]

[…] *Here, from the Principality of Liège, where we come from and of which we are proud*
We are part of a militant class that cries out loud and clear to those in power
That we are (yes, we are!) and will remain revolted by the misfortunes we are fighting against
That is, injustice, police corruption, not to mention the misdeeds committed by the government
Towards the poor, increasingly poor, who are sinking into alcohol and for whom we are the spokespersons

The second verse starts with Seg rapping: "*We're the prince-bishops of rap, our lyrics striking*," before claiming their willingness to "*show all these people that our movement is far from dead and is getting stronger and stronger*." At the heart of the song is an affirmation of the strength of the hip hop movement based in Liège, through lyrics that assert a certain militancy linked to the basic ideological content of hip hop in relation to the struggle against injustice. In "*L'eau qui dort*" ["The Sleeping Water"], released by the group Malfrats Linguistiques (actually a part of H-Posse) in 1995 on their record demo, Seg reaffirms the strength of Liège's hip hop movement:

You thought the city of Liège couldn't cope/ To the capital's hip hop that is certainly tenacious
Home Sweet Home [in English in the original lyrics], *no place like home/ And you can criticize even when you don't know what you're talking about* […]
Fortunately some posses haven't forgotten/ The word behind H.I.P. H.O.P.: Unity! [...]
The hip hop mind in Liège is getting stronger and stronger/ The solidarity between groups is our strong point

Once again, the existence of a hip hop mind in Liège that sets it apart from other ones is the guiding principle behind Seg's verse. He reaffirms also one of the core values that he identifies with the hip hop movement: unity. From *Fidèles au vinyl*, we can also mention the presence of the groups CQDF and K Particulier from the city of Mons, in the province of Hainaut. In "*Karaktère K*" ["Karakter K"], K Particulier addresses some of his lyrics in relation to the nascent Belgian movement, rapping: "*We don't ape gangstas* [in French: *gangsters*]* *just to show off/ We keep it simple, humble and proud while expressing our ideas/ We'll never reach*

a structured level/ If we don't acquire maturity." While the first two lines clarify the posture of the movement for broad audiences to deconstruct clichés or amalgams, the second two lines, rapped by another group member, speak directly to the movement and call for perpetuating its development.

In another song on the compilation, "*L'immigré*" ["The Immigrant"], the rapper Level-Bass raps the following lyrics:

One morning with love my father shook my hand/ He said to me: 'my son, of your homeland, of your blood, you are far away'
Today I understood that he wanted me to be happy/ And these words forever echo in my heart
Isolated, I was lost, alone in a distant world/ My life knew neither evening nor morning
Some called me Mohamed and others 'the curly-haired'/ At last my glass cage is broken forever
So if like me you hold out hope for tomorrow / Together let's give destiny a helping hand

He talks about part of his immigration experience, and how as a child it was perhaps harder for him to understand his parents' choice to move to a country other than their homeland. He evokes the feeling of social isolation and the experience of otherness in a society where he is now a member of a minority group, categorized on the basis of physical characteristics among others. His subsequent reference to a "broken glass cage" is probably a reference to his embrace of hip hop. He evokes the hope that this adherence would generate, and addresses the listener directly, calling on him/her to remain hopeful and persevere in this optimism. The last line is then repeated as a chorus or hook and sung in the typical manner of ragamuffin music.[167]

In addition to *Fidèles au vinyl*, 1993 saw another important event taking place outside of Brussels. A European hip hop dance championship was held in Charleroi and spawned the city's first hip hop dance groups. R. Esserhane (see above) explained during an interview (in Eden 2018: n.p.) how this championship acted as a kind of revelation for him:

> When I was a teenager, I didn't go to school, I was hanging around on the streets, I could clearly have gone wrong... But in 1993, I had an encounter: I went to the Charleroi Exhibition Centre where a hip hop event organized by Fares [Boudidit] was taking place, and there, the slap, I saw a guy turn on his head. Turning on his head! Love at first sight! I want to do that too. So I researched these practices. I met local groups like Charleston Boys and CB4. I attend demos. I

[167] Ragamuffin is a musical genre that emerged in Jamaica in the 1980s, derived from dancehall and reggae, characterized by the use of samples, upbeat rhythms, as well as social commentary lyrics.

> look for VHS to watch the moves and get inspired. I'm slowly learning the vocabulary. I taught myself hip hop. This passion saved me. It channeled my negative tensions and gave me a future.

The event was co-organized by Fares Boudidit, born in Brussels of French and Moroccan origins, who used to practice hip hop dance in Matonge, a neighborhood in Brussels known for its concentration of sub-Saharan African diasporas, particularly Congolese groups (see Chapter 12). After moving to Charleroi in 1985 to begin his studies, Boudidit continued to practice dance in the context of the emergence of hip hop and its first recuperations. He explains: "I started giving classes in well-known fitness studios during my university studies. It was quite unprecedented, given that urban dance was practiced in the streets by the children of Congolese and Moroccan immigrants. At a certain point, these young people began to be pushed out of the scene." In reference to the rise and growing visibility of the far right, he continues saying: "After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Russia was no longer a threat. We had to find another enemy: immigration and its symbols." His initiative to organize a European hip hop dance championship in Charleroi can then be understood as a desire to gain more independence from the very few opportunities available to the Francophone Belgian hip hop movement at the time (FRMSAFH, n. d.: n.p.).

Section 2

The foundation of an unaccomplished Francophone Belgian rap music art world

In the early 1990s, Francophone Belgian hip hop began to develop outside Brussels. At the same time, the rap music it spawned underwent another dynamic: its increasing diversification. Certain evolutions of the aesthetic and artistic codes of Francophone rap at the time helped to broaden the spectrum of its creative potential in Belgium. The concept of the art world appears useful for shedding light on this type of evolution within a given ecosystem of artistic activity.

Contrary to some authors who would mobilize the notion of the art world in a rather vague, metaphorical perspective, H. Becker (2010 [1982]: 22) defends a "more technical" use of it through a "tautological definition": "the network of all those whose activities, coordinated thanks to a common knowledge of conventional means of work, contribute to the production of the very works that make the notoriety of the art world." Thus, in opposition to the dominant tradition in the sociology of art (Péquignot 2005), the author does not necessarily consider the

figure of the artist at the center of its whole analysis, but rather at the center of the cooperative networks and chains of cooperation allowing artistic production. This approach, breaking away from a vision of art as a kind of world apart, is inspired by interactionism and focuses on social interactions and certain meanings considered to be at the heart of social behavior. Artistic works are thus considered to come from a set of human and material resources based on conventions understood by all participants. In this framing, an artistic work is therefore the result of collective action, "the common production of all persons who cooperate according to the conventions characteristic of an art world" (Becker 2010: 59). These conventions, aesthetic or material, are "common presuppositions" that enable the agents involved in the art world to cooperate effectively through a "division of labor" (Becker 1999: 99).

Regular cooperation is then at the heart of Becker's (1999:99) art world concept: "When such cooperation takes place repeatedly and even habitually between the same individuals, or individuals sufficiently similar to be considered identical, we can speak of the existence of an 'art world'." An art world is thus composed by "all people whose activities are necessary for the production of the very particular works that this world (and others, if any) defines as art" (Becker 2010: 58). It can be understood as a "network of participants" who are not exclusively artists, whose activities, ruled by standard practices of cooperation between various types of actors, result in artistic production (objects and events) being itself at the center of chains of cooperation (Becker 2015: 37). Such an approach, by refuting the idea that art exists in itself, allows us to avoid the homogenization and reification of the art worlds in question by considering arts "as an issue of multiple conflicts, collaborations and negotiations, rather than as an unequivocal, timeless and homogeneous form" (Hammou 2014: 8). It is a question of "understanding how artistic activities are constituted as systems of permanent negotiation, devoid a priori of univocal normative rules." The making of art and the creation of artworks are "shaped by the multiple decisions and interpretations that make the entire 'art world' its own 'author'" (Benghozi and Paris 2010).

This concept refers thus to places, to agents (primary and secondary), and to objects and activities of various kinds (production, distribution, consumption/reception/mediation), as well as conventions and shared rules structuring the chains of cooperation. This set of processes and mechanisms creates cooperative networks whose collective action produces artworks. These elements make the concept of the art world a social reality whose "stability and logics of variability can be highlighted" (Girel 2014: n.p.). Another important feature of the art world

lies in its instability. As Becker (in Hammou 2014: 262) highlights when referencing Hammou's book about French rap music, "the expression 'art world' implies, for many people, solidity and permanence […] Yet no art world has ever been stable for very long – not even for more than a few seconds." Indeed, Becker considers art worlds as "fundamentally unstable" and highlights the importance of this acceptation when analyzing them, their functioning, and the variability of changes which occurs in it (ibid.: 264). Therefore, within and between each area of activity in an art world, "the equilibrium structure is constantly being rebuilt as a function of different evolutions" (Benghozi 1990: 138).

As Becker goes on to say: "Whenever individuals collaborate on the production of works of art, conflicts may arise as a result of differences in motivation and interests between partners" (1999: 101). He explains that cooperation between individuals involved in an art world can be achieved through debate at every stage of the process, before taking music as an example: "What notes and harmonies are acceptable, what instruments will be used, how long the pieces will last, and so on" (ibid.). This helps us to understand the importance of conventions in the art world, these latter being defined as "existing agreements within which to make adjustments and limited innovations" within which arbitrariness is one of the main features:

> As the word 'convention' indicates, these agreements can be perfectly arbitrary; there is, for example, no intrinsic reason for an orchestra to tune to 'A' at 440Hz rather than 444 or 436. Conventions allow the audience to know in advance what is likely to happen in a work of art, and thus provide a framework within which the artist can create emotional effects by delaying or even frustrating the audience's expectations (ibid.).

Thus, the artwork is the result of a continuous process in perpetual mutation and its result depends on "the combination of routine choices, individual choices and the constraints of the artistic environment, all possibilities from which the actors make their selection" (Girel 2014: n.p.). Therefore, Becker does not consider art worlds as "institutions in the sociological sense of the term, i.e., as structural devices that guarantee, as such, the predictability of behavior and relationships between actors." Indeed, art worlds have "a local or limited functionality and their structure is not predetermined" (Benghozi 1990: 133).

Remembering the theoretical framework and considering that "we need a better understanding of the common features of cultural goods associated with minority groups" (Hammou 2016: 69), I think the concept of an art world is useful to analyze the development of

Francophone Belgian rap music from the 1990s by taking "an interest in all rap practices, no matter the legitimacy that they are recognized in retrospect" (Hammou 2014: 7), and a particular focus on issues related to racism and racialization. The purpose is therefore to highlight the conventions, the human and material resources, and the collective action within which chains of cooperation are developed by all the agents involved in this art world to make rap music production activities possible.

I explained above how the final version of Belgium's first rap music hit was created in cooperation between the artists and the people working for the music label concerned. I have also analyzed examples of cooperation between hip hop and rap artists and public organizations in the implementation of public policies. Media coverage and debates surrounding the arrival and development of hip hop in Francophone Belgium are also part of these analyses. Taken together, these three analytical paths allow us to identify certain initial elements making up the art world in which Francophone Belgian rap music started to develop. This allows the identification of the input of several actors involved in the production of rap songs and/or events, and who cooperate based on a certain shared idea of such artworks.

Thus, before 1990 and the release of "*Vous êtes fous!*," it is hardly possible to speak of a professionally organized art world of Francophone Belgian rap. As there is no organized distribution and dissemination of works on any scale, the general public has limited access to these works, while "participation in the official distribution system is one of the clues that enable art circles to distinguish 'artists' from 'amateurs'. Individuals who are not distributed in the recognized circuits, or those who for one reason or another resort to parallel systems, are likely to be definitively classified as amateurs" (Benghozi 1990: 137). The audience is thus largely made up of circles that orbit directly around the Francophone Belgian hip hop and rap pioneers themselves. At this point, it is important to highlight that the concept of an art world as developed by Becker considers that the artist's public is not simply an audience in the economic sense of the term. The relationship between the artists and their audience is not only considered in the frame of a demand and supply chain, showing again that "all aspects of artistic production, from creation to distribution, remain objects of negotiation and adjustment" (Benghozi 1990: 134).

In this fledgling art world, we find three main groups of agents. Firstly, there are the artists and the technical collaborators. For example, the BRC compilation *Stop the Violence* was mixed at

the *Studio Madeleine* in Brussels thanks to the collaboration between the music producer Yves Martin (see above), his studio sound engineers, and the artists of BRC. Secondly, a distinct group of agents can be observed within the sphere of silent partners and critics. As the examples in the first part of the empirical analysis show, most of these actors come from the sociocultural sector of youth policy in Francophone Belgium. Private actors also have been part of this second circle of stakeholders identified in the Belgian Francophone underground rap art world of the 1990s, such as record label/film studio Warner Bros. and the former Brussels shoe store Sharp 2000 for which Benny B (A. H. Gharbaoui) recorded a rapped commercial.[168] The third and final category of identifiable agents in this art world at this time is the consumer audience, consisting of occasional, curious spectators and enlightened amateurs, given that the works are not distributed on a medium or large scale (national, regional, or international).

The success of "*Vous êtes fous!*" testifies to a change in the configuration of this art world regarding the group Benny B. When Benny B passed the casting organized by the label Private Life in the offices of Brussels radio station Top FM—"a radio station that organized funk, soul and rap events that we went to" (Benny B [A. H. Gharbaoui], in Sarrazin 2013)—the label's main intention was to make available its resources, networks, and skills to produce a hit song, whatever the music genre. In this way, he was acting like a normal player in the popular music industry, seeking to "position himself for situations that are likely to arise" (Becker, in Hammou 2014: 267). The label took part in this boom by entering into a chain of cooperation with Benny B. This chain began by being involved directly in the creation of the artwork, before mobilizing a network of radio stations to play the song. It was at this point that several actors in the audiovisual world also got involved in this chain of cooperation, inviting Benny B to perform on their shows. These inputs were decisive for the song's success and it was after this event that Francophone Belgian rap began to be known by a very large audience.

Indeed, following the release of the song, it was distributed under professional conditions thanks to the efforts of two groups of new agents involved in the chain of cooperation with Benny B. The Private Life label comprised the first new agent grouping, as it took the initiative to commission the artwork before actively participating in its creation as technical collaborator. It then became involved in the song's promotion, taking on the role of publisher in charge of "marketing and distribution," as stated on the back cover of the 45 rpm single. The role of the

[168] See *S.I.S Play* (2022), "Benny B, Daddy K, Perfect : 40 ans d'amitié ! Interview réalisé par Lucifer sur SIS Radio" (starting from 1:05).

publisher in the music industry is comparable to that of a publishing house for books, comics, etc.: “The music publisher works alongside creators. They generally carry out, on behalf of authors and composers, the various procedures involved in protecting the work [...] and marketing it (finding outlets). By contract, the author transfers to the publisher the right and duty to exploit the work” (Henceval and Dufey 1996: 463). The work of the music publisher is to protect, distribute, and exploit the musical work and “it will have to invest in setting up an administrative, marketing and promotional infrastructure” (ibid.: 464). Thus, if Private Life intervened in the very creation of the song, it was because the label assumed that this would facilitate its duty of distribution and exploitation as a music publisher and give the song a better chance of popular and commercial success.

The second group of new agents to emerge with the release of “*Vous êtes fous!*” is that of broadcasters. These can be divided into two categories: a network of official distributors and local radio stations used by the Private Life label and Francophone television channels. The presence of the first sub-category testifies to the publishing work carried out by the label, while the second sub-category mobilized on its own because it considered that this song could be integrated into its editorial line. The involvement of these actors was decisive in the commercial and popular success of the artwork, which was broadcast to an audience that outstripped other Francophone Belgian rap songs of the time. No other songs from Francophone rap music had previously been integrated into a large-scale professional distribution network.

As explained in the previous empirical analysis section in relation to authenticity issues, Benny B’s commercial success gave rise to the first significant debate about major conventions in the Francophone Belgian rap music art world. An explicit tension arose around the definition and commodification of the music created by Benny B, to the point where a large part of the movement positioned itself against this music, not recognizing it as belonging to hip hop. This situation shows that conventions play a part in “the logic of consecration, in the process of recognition as much as in that of disqualification of works and artists” (Girel 2014: n.p.). Indeed, in the case of hip hop, these conventions participate in the definition of what will be considered “authentic” or not. These conventions, and all the elements that make up an art world, are variable and subject to change as a result of accepted innovations (technological or creative) or recent reconsideration: “No art world can protect itself for long or completely against the forces of change, whether they come from within or from internal tensions” (Becker 2010: 301). These developments further underline the importance of considering the instability

and variability of the components that constitute the art world as a fundamental aspect of empirical analysis. Regarding Francophone Belgian rap music, the mid-1990s saw the emergence of a trend towards greater diversification.

A group crystallizing such artistic diversification can be found in De Puta Madre, from the Brussels (municipality of Schaerbeek) collective RAB, featuring the rappers Rayer, Smimooz, Sozyone, Dors, Don Binx One, and DJ Grazzhoppa. Breaking free from certain codes that had become standardized in Francophone Belgian rap music, De Puta Madre rapped first for rap. Playing with freestyles, original technical flows and rhymes, lyrics in other languages with Brussels or Arabic slang, storytelling or exaggerated caricatures, dark and haunting melodies, De Puta Madre's rap embodies the very spirit of the collective from which it springs: "*nothing to give fuck about*" (in French: "*Rien A Branler* [RAB]"). In 1994, they released their first maxi-single, "*Zorolerenarr*," on the Francophone Swiss independent label Noise Product. It is a storytelling song based on the Italian movie *Zorro, la volpe* (in French: "*Zorro, le renard*"; in English: "Zorro, the Fox") in which the rappers draw inspiration from the journey of the vigilante Zorro to assert their will of justice and explain their methods of fighting against what they describe as oppressors: "*Zorro will make everything right, the widow and the orphan won't have to cry any more*"; "*And to get his ideas across, he has no hesitation in beating up the nation's oppressors*"; "*Always classy when protecting the population/ And often the law he violates*". These lyrics by Smimooz illustrate the originality of the songwriting, which was not very widespread in Francophone Belgian rap at the time, while the message is in line with hip hop culture's basic ideological content, in being related to a desire for justice in the streets.

The following year was an important one for rap music in France and marked a turning point with the release of several projects that would become essential classics in French hip hop culture. In addition, the release of the French movie *La Haine* [*Hate*] (see Chapter 11) the same year gave even greater visibility to a certain image of French inner-city cultures, in which hip hop is increasingly involved. The soundtrack to this movie, a compilation of French rap featuring many of the rap artists active at the time, called *La Haine, musiques inspirées du film*, quickly became a cult favorite, in part because of the polemic generated by one of its songs.[169]

[169] "*Sacrifice de poulets*" ["Pigs Sacrifice"] is a song of the group Ministère A.M.E.R. explicitly calling for riots and violent revolution as a response to racist oppression. Police forces are particularly targeted by the group, which calls for their sacrifice in this scheme of "revolution." The French Ministry of the Interior prosecuted the group "for incitement to murder" and it was sentenced to a fine of around €40,000. This was the first court sentence in France concerning the lyrics of a rap band (Thompson 2012). Other cult French rap songs and albums were also

In the same vein, the movie *Ma 6-T va crack-er* [*My Suburbs are Going to Crack*] and its soundtrack released in 1997 would also reflect a part of life in French suburbs, or "*cités*," relating a war between rival gangs and riots following police blunders.

This period in French rap marked the growing visibility of artists whose style and lyrics reflected a more direct link with the street and daily life in the *cités*. This "new" trend in French rap was sometimes contrasted with that represented by MC Solaar, considered as more consensual and accessible to a public outside of the rap world, such as the so-called cultivated and bourgeois public of Paris. Additionally, at this period, certain Francophone rap music works began to adopt an imaginative approach similar to a cinematic work, with the music itself being the projector and the scenario and the lyrics being narration and dialogue. Like "*Zorolerenarr*," the first album by De Puta Madre, *Une ball* [sic] *dans la tête* [*A Bullet in the Head*], embodies this new creative dynamic in Francophone Belgian rap. It is also the first "independent" album of Francophone Belgian rap. In 1995, De Puta Madre founded the label 9mm Recordz, which released the album (*PointCulture*, n. d.). As the group explains in a 2012 filmed interview realized in the frame of a tribute concert to the album, the title of the latter, and its eponymous song, is taken from the famous film *Bullet in the Head* (1990) by Hong Kong director John Woo: "It's a crazy, violent film, and maybe it was a comparison with the album we were recording at the time." Rayer, Smimooz, and Sozyone develop this point: "The bullet is rather the music, the album we provide, which is to be put in the head, we come with a bullet in the head, that is to say an album that is a banger [French slang: "*c'est de la balle*"] and that will go directly into your head if you like it."[170]

Of the album, Smimooz says: "It's an album conceived like a film, it's an album conceived like few albums I think in French,"[171] as if each song were a movie scene to be imagined from the music and lyrics. The album's title song is quite indicative of this, as its sequencing is inspired by techniques used in the cinema to facilitate the linking of scenes, using ambient noises and sound effects that are not musical in the strict sense and are therefore freed from certain rules, such as the accuracy of the frequencies they produce. The technical conventions used for the mixing of the voices also differ from most tracks of the time, as it has the particularity of adding

released in 1995, such as *Paris sous les bombes* [*Paris under Bombs*] by the group Suprême NTM, *Métèque et mat* [*Metic and Mat*] by the rapper Akhenaton, and *Conçu pour durer* [*Designed to Last*] by the group La Cliqua.

[170] See *Chronix* (2012), "De Puta Madre interview 'Une ball dans la tête' #Rewind" (starting from 00:10).

[171] See *Chronix* (2012), "De Puta Madre interview 'Une ball dans la tête' #Rewind" (starting from 1:20).

a perpetual audio delay, giving echo and reverberation effects to the lead voices throughout. These techniques and aesthetic codes of artistic creation, as well as Sozyone's flow and rapping style, enable the song to create a particular atmosphere that immerses the listener in a universe, a precise story, told in the manner of a movie. In this way, the objective of the rapper is to immerse the audience in the fictional character's experience, evoking a cinematic narrative and not necessarily the realities of a life close to the streets. The scratches by DJ Grazzhoppa at the end of the song continue this approach, reproducing dialogue from movies or news reports. Nevertheless, this does not prevent the rapper from using the symbolic imaginary created by such a song to formulate metaphorical lyrics anchored in a certain reality, such as when he affirms his authenticity to the practice of rap music by opposing head-on the presence of "wack MCs" in it: "A bullet in the face of the wacks, [this is] too hard [for them], I exterminate the wack MCs."

Later in the same interview, the band talks about the reception of the album within the movement and highlights that the humorous side of the project may not have been clearly perceived by some. Sozyone explains: "The hip hop audience at the time was really a first-degree one […] People didn't have a sense of humor or criticism." The interviewer then shares his view, saying that the situation seemed to be somewhat split. Smimooz intervenes then and highlights: "There's another branch of hip hop, the more social side and all that, who didn't understand what we were trying to do, you know." Rayer concludes these thoughts by explaining:

> That's also the strength of this album. Some people found it funny, others didn't, others found it ultra-violent and others didn't, others found it outdated, others didn't, others picked it up and thought: 'Well, that's good, but for later' or not. So maybe that's that too, the interesting thing about this album is that not everyone agrees with it.[172]

The group goes on to explain that the project's artistic approach was not predetermined at the outset. Unlike the groups mentioned above, who sought first and foremost to claim for a rap practice relocated within the sociopolitical and cultural context of Francophone Belgium, De Puta Madre simply wanted to "do something crazy." Sozyone develops: "We were really into the same thing as guys in New York, you know. We didn't have the idea or the concept of

[172] See *Chronix* (2012), "De Puta Madre interview 'Une ball dans la tête' #Rewind" (starting from 3:55).

saying: 'Yeah, this is Belgium.' We weren't doing Francophone rap, we were doing rap, you know what I mean?"[173] Later in the interview, he explains:

> The RAB crew was made up of guys who did graffiti, breaking, DJs, rappers, guys who hit people in the face, guys who did security. You know what I mean? It was a team, a real team. And so that state of mind is what we're trying to transcribe into our lyrics and our album, you see. That's why I say there's no message, it's just the state of mind of a crew, you know, which I think is more or less transcribed in this album.[174]

De Puta Madre and the RAB crew claim thus to embody a certain hip hop state of mind focused solely on artistic practices and not necessarily on a series of sociopolitical messages to be explicitly attached to them. This approach is reflected in the adoption of certain aesthetic codes in the writing of lyrics and the final instrumental arrangements, which are designed to translate this state of mind into songs. These artists contributed then to the diversification of the art world of Francophone Belgian rap at the time by emancipating themselves from the "social side" of the movement. Therefore, 9mm Recordz is characterized by "a strong desire for autonomy in management, artistic radicalism, and a refusal to be associated with the sociocultural sphere" (*Lezarts Urbains* 2000: 168). As Smimooz explains in another interview:

> At the end of the '80s, there was already this social side, helping young people with workshops. But we found ourselves directly in the networks we wanted to reach, doing big concerts, festivals or club shows. That's what we wanted, not to do social rap to help young people. That distorts the artist's original intention, which is to do things for scarce subsidies. We've never been into the idea of making things accessible. On the contrary, we preferred to remain inaccessible, so that people would think, 'What the hell is this? The crazier we were, the happier we were' (in Schmitz 2017: n.p.).

Another pioneering Belgian hip hop crew to emerge from the municipality of Schaerbeek is CNN199. Additionally, in 1995, Rival Capone, an iconic rapper from this crew, founded the label Souterrain Production, which has been described as an "independent structure that aims above all to serve hip hop, it offers a meeting place, promotes hip hop culture, organizes events and carries out 'street promotion' [in English in the original quote]" (*Lezarts Urbains* 2000: 167). Backed by a certain "continuity" and "longevity," CNN199 and Souterrain Production

[173] See *Chronix* (2012), "De Puta Madre interview 'Une ball dans la tête' #Rewind" (starting from 5:50).
[174] See *Chronix* (2012), "De Puta Madre interview 'Une ball dans la tête' #Rewind" (starting from 9:10).

echo a "street protest" rap that aims to be "committed and militant," unlike De Puta Madre and 9mm Recordz, who claimed a more strictly "artistic" side of rap music (Schmitz 2017: n.p.).

These developments about the state of the art world of Francophone Belgian rap in the 1990s help to shed light on the way some of its artists deal with racism in their songs. I discuss these elements in the following section, using De Puta Madre's *Une ball dans la tête* as a starting point. Before that, it is useful to talk briefly about a song that marked French and Francophone rap music in 1997. Following the adoption of the "Pasqua-Debré laws" about immigration and the conditions of entry and residence of foreigners in France, various French rap artists mobilized against these laws in a song entitled "*11'30 contre les lois racistes*" ["11'30 Against Racist Laws"]. From an idea by Jean-François Richet (director of *Ma 6-T va crack-er*) and the French music label Cercle Rouge, these artists have asserted their opposition to these laws and the ideas behind them, adopting a critical perspective to highlight and denounce "the hunt for immigrants" or "folkloric, good-natured anti-racism in the euphoria of festival days." They call for the fight against "racism, fascism, sexism and all kinds of xenophobia," while recalling France's colonial period. The song is thus intended to raise collective awareness of institutional racism and the resulting discrimination in France and testifies to an era when French rap was intended to be rather protest-oriented and explicitly socially conscious.

Section 3
Rapping against racism and for hip hop in 1990s Francophone Belgium

At the beginning of the same filmed interview, the group members address the issue of racism when talking about the conception of the album. Sozyone starts by explaining that for them "what was impossible to do was to make theme songs." He gives the examples of racism and police abuse and violence: "You know, talking about racism or the police or any of that stuff, it seemed obvious to us, so why talk about it?" The interviewer intervenes to point out that, in his opinion, this theme permeates all the group's songs. Rayer intervenes then to clarify the artistic approach of the group in relation to the writing, or rather non-writing, of theme songs: "We're not going to develop the theme all the way through, we prefer to give a little touch at a given moment, or give an example or illustrate a scene rather than develop a whole theme, for example." Sozyone illustrates such a writing process with a concrete example: "Because if you say, for example, 'Hicham the inhabitant,' that means you've got a buddy called Hicham, and the fact that you've got a buddy called Hicham means you've already got buddies who aren't

just Spanish, Belgian or Italian, you know what I mean? You already have international buddies. Saying that, you don't have to say: 'Hey, racism is not good.'"[175]

These developments make it possible to formulate interpretations about the group's approach when considering racism issues in their lyrics. According to De Puta Madre, there would be no necessity to create theme songs in rap music because the cultural ensemble lying behind it would automatically claim for social justice and recognition of multiculturalism. The narrative of resistance against racism and oppressive systems in hip hop would allow one to address these issues in subtle ways, or in a more subtle way than by making thematic songs. Indeed, it is worth noting that Sozyone adds the following explanations directly after evoking their writing process with the example of racism: "The thing is, we're from Brussels, and in Brussels we invented subtlety, you know what I mean? It's subtlety, it's made in Belgium, you see, in any other country in the world, subtlety doesn't exist."[176]

In "*Une nuit de plus avek le crew* [sic]" ["One More Night With the Crew"] (1995), we note that Sozyone, when rapping in French and Spanish, addresses one of the other group members in these terms: "My nigga Dors [in French in the original lyrics]*." Dors is a member of De Puta Madre of sub-Saharan African origins, and it might be thus surprising to hear Sozyone, socially considered as a white man of Spanish origin living in Belgium, address his friend Dors using the n-word. Indeed, in the US, it would have been difficult to imagine someone in Sozyone's socio-racialized position using the n-word without it being considered a racist practice. Nevertheless, two observations can be made here. Firstly, Dors himself appears on the song, rapping the first verse. We would then assume that if he had had a problem with Sozyone's lyrics, he would have pointed it out to him. Secondly, the word "nigga" is derived from the racial insult "nigger," referring to slavery and colonization, in a social stigma-reversal perspective used by people of sub-Saharan African descent involved in hip hop (see Chapter 2). Even though these two observations do not intrinsically legitimate Sozyone's use of this word, it provides some context to the analysis of these lyrics.[177]

[175] See *Chronix* (2012), "De Puta Madre interview 'Une ball dans la tête' #Rewind" (starting from 1:30).

[176] See *Chronix* (2012), "De Puta Madre interview 'Une ball dans la tête' #Rewind" (starting from 1:30).

[177] See R.A.T. Judy (2004: 107) for further developments about the movement "from nigger to nigga" related to issues of commodified cultural identities and authenticity: "Understanding the movement from nigger to nigga means recalling the historical systematic employment of nigger as an exchange value, as well as giving some consideration to a set of problems specific to the issue of human capital at the end of political economy."

More generally, we note that Dors and Sozyone rap sometimes in languages other than French; English for Dors ("*Straight from Schaerbeek, [De] Puta Madre is going on/ I'm down with and you know they've got skills*") and English and Spanish for Sozyone.[178] This is hardly surprising given the particularly internationalized context of hip hop and the claim for a kind of hip hop global nation. It is also worth remembering that some of the very first French rappers, such as Dee Nasty and Lionel D, started out in English, drawing direct inspiration from US hip hop. Another song on this album, "*Phlashman*" ["Flashman"] (featuring DJ Grazzhoppa), gives an example of what the group meant when saying this album was conceived like a film. Indeed, the end of the song contains a rather abrupt transition to its conclusion; DJ Grazzhoppa jumps in after the lyrics to execute scratches that lead the listener to imagine himself as part of the crowd at a De Puta Madre show. Sozyone then intervenes and declares: "*And for all young people, listen up!* [scratches stop suddenly]/ *And for all young people, listen to me carefully!/ My brother doesn't joke with Beurs/ Nor Whites, nor Blacks, he's a man of the desert*."[179] Once again, these lyrics can be interpreted as a way of highlighting the internationality of hip hop and its appeal to cross various socially constructed borders.

Speaking of colonialism and all the borders that racist ideologies succeeded in building throughout history, the rappers Monsieur R and Akro from the Liège and Brussels groups Malfrats Linguistiques and H-Posse (who would become Starflam) addressed this theme in the song "*Au fil de l'histoire*" ["Throughout History"], performed in 1994 during a German TV show called *Freestyle*, which focused on hip hop.[180] Akro begins the song by going directly into the subject:

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[178] Sozyone also raps in English and Spanish in other songs on the album such as "*Esto es de Puta Mama*" ["This Is de Puta Mama"] (featuring DJ Grazzhoppa), "*Et dans le biz on respekt le D.A.T.* [sic]" ["And in the Biz We Respekt the D.A.T. [sic]"], or "*Phlashman*".

[179] This last sentence can refer to many things. One may be the famous movie *Hondo* with John Wayne in the title role, knowing that in French, the movie title was translated by "*Hondo, l'homme du désert* [Hondo, the man of the desert]", and that some Francophone hip hop artists sometimes took inspiration from the Western film genre (e.g., the two albums *Sad Hill* (1997) and *Sad Hill Impact* (2000) produced by (DJ) Khéops of the French rap band IAM). This film, based on a novel by Louis L'Amour (1953), tells the story of Hondo Lane, a white man presented as a "part Indian", army scout and dispatch rider "who loses his horse in an encounter with a couple of Apaches. He makes his way to an isolated ranch where he encounters Angie Lowe and her son Johnny who were left alone when Angie's husband, Ed, disappeared" (*Goodreads* n. d.: n.p.). Placed in the context of its time, this film is considered by certain people to be one of the first Westerns to nuance racial stereotypes against Native Americans. However, according to Joel Deshaye (2022: 135) when analyzing the American Western in Canadian literature, "John Wayne's Hondo, 'part Indian', represents a fantasy of guiltless colonial Indigenization. That the cowboy in the Western thinks he can Indigenize himself without also victimizing himself (or caring much about others) is an assimilation-without-consequences idea."

[180] See *Aggro.TV* (1994), "Freestyle – NAS/H-Posse – Folge 22 – 90's flashback (official version AggroTV)" (starting from 21:55).

The course of history has made me realize/ That my ancestors did many wrongs
In Africa, they were valiant colonizers/ The black man was the prey, the white man was the dominator
Because of his fair skin, he instituted slavery/ Brought the Bible with him, but tore out the pages
At a time when God saw all men as equal/ They treated their fellow men like animals
And so we witnessed a veritable genocide/ The white man's behavior became greedier and greedier
He dragged the African onto large ships/ Forced to abandon their possessions without saying a word
Many persecutions thus befell the black man/ Deporting him to every continent in history

These lyrics tackle racism by directly addressing an economic and geopolitical project backed with the ideology of racism, that of colonialism. Akro overviews (Belgian) colonialism in Africa, as well as forced labor, slavery, and genocide, with issues related to the racialization of "black" and "white" people as the ground underlying the phenomenon. Regarding the context of Belgium's colonial history and the very late emergence of the postcolonial debate in the country, it is notable that a white rapper from Belgium chose to write a whole song about colonialism in the early 1990s with the aim of denouncing it.

After a few musical scratches executed by DJ Mig One and DJ Sonar (the two DJs of H-Posse at that time), Monsieur R begins his verse:

This is how the Negro [in French: "*nègre*"]* *sees himself on a great continent/ He's no more than a doll to be happily manipulated*
In the South, he works in cotton fields/ Under the pretext that the white man rushes under a blazing sun
With time the [missing words] *are renewed/ Slavery fades to make way for industrial sites*
Men and women exhausted themselves from week to week/ Hoping one day to know a more serene life
Unfortunately, after the lynching came unemployment/ Sadness then intoxication slowly spread
Only the directors of big companies/ Wasted their money on nonsense
[missing words] *derisory behavior/ This fear of the unknown will carry them throughout history*

Speaking also of racial hierarchization and the dehumanization of the populations of sub-Saharan Africa, Monsieur R, himself of sub-Saharan origins, establishes a historical continuity between the periods of slavery and the early days of industrialization, as well as sociopolitical consequences of the development of industrial societies (such as social policies related to unemployment or the emergence of multinational enterprise). The third and final verse is rapped by both Akro and Monsieur R:

[Akro] *After so many tears, the years passed/ The black American rebuilt his life in new lands*
The man's past had been soiled time and again/ Now he was back to a life of normality
[Monsieur R] *And Joe* [French slang for ordinary people], *stop, you're in the middle of a fable*
[missing words] *once again deplorable*/ [Akro] *An example?*
[Monsieur R] *In the sixties/ Where refusing a Negro in the stores was commonplace*
This is not a history class or Afrocentrism/ I'm clearing up a past that plunged me into skepticism
Really, why was I born one fine day in Belgium?/ Although my roots and culture are in Africa
[Akro] *Man has always feared many differences/ Racism is the fruit of so much ignorance*
That's why so many fascists persist today/ They manipulate the economies of some countries like puppeteers
Giving bread to the poor to establish his power/ It means contributing to [missing words] *so we keep thinking about history*

This last verse concludes the rappers' historical review, which begins with an evocation of the evolution of the recognition of the civil and political rights of the African American populations. The exchange and mutual interpellations between Akro and Monsieur R through their lyrics are intended to highlight that the formal recognition of such civil and political rights does not necessarily imply the end of structural racial discrimination and social exclusion. Monsieur R. relates these concerns to the context of a postcolonial society like Belgium and transcontinental migration. Akro finally steps in to synthesize the point, saying that racism is also fear of the other and the fruit of ignorance. He goes on to talk about the persistence of fascism and related movements in Europe that would use and manipulate the economy to gain political power. During the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, fascism resurfaced in Europe after being discredited and marginalized after World War II. This revival was associated with the decline of post-war economic prosperity. Although these new fascists of the late 20th century have won electoral support, they have lacked the robust activist base and large-scale street fighting groups of the past (Thomas 2019). The song tackles racism from an international and national perspective, focusing on Afrophobia and negrophobia and related historical, political, and economic projects such as colonialism, before going on to generalize by looking at the contemporary context.

At the very end of the song, Akro reminds us that the group want to promote the compilation *Fidèles au vinyl*, saying: "100% Belgian rap, Belgian compilation/ Respect to Deutschland [in English in the original talk]." As seen above, this attests to a certain desire of a large part of the Francophone Belgian hip hop movement to gain recognition for the development of hip hop in

Belgium, and to assert the existence of Francophone Belgian hip hop. In this respect, it is interesting to note the intervention of rapper Baloji, a member of H-Posse, during the interview for the same TV show: "In Belgium, the hip hop scene isn't structured, it's everyone for himself, there's no hip hop unity [...] In Belgium there's nothing, there are no people interested in producing rap. In Belgium, it's like Holland, it's techno that people want to hear about."[181]

In this underground art world of Francophone Belgian rap music, the mixtape,[182] a new distribution format, will be used increasingly, illustrating the commitment of these rap artists to create their music even in the absence of professional networks and resources. In 1996, Daddy K released a mixtape called *Et c'est comme ça* [*And That's How It Is*]. In the eponymous song, he raps and proclaims the following lyrics in the last verse: "*Why is it always the tanned one who gets accused by prejudice?/ Judged by the brainless people/ Me, I get away from these people and have fun within the hip hop*." Later he says: "*For I speak only the truth, and nothing but the truth/ Inch'Allah, I hope we're all gonna be okay. For represent too the brothers in the low quarters/ Who have nothing left to lose and tell you: 'enough'*". In the outro of the mixtape, called "*Je me sens bien*" ["I Feel Good"], he raps also: "*But I feel bad when a white man beats up a black* [in English in the original lyrics]* *man/ When a brother gets killed, it hurts me, it hurts me […] But I feel bad when I'm being controlled/ When I'm accused while I've done nothing, it hurts me, it hurts me. But I feel bad when cops commit blunders/ That they give us a hard time, it hurts me, it hurts me*." These lyrics attest to the willingness of Daddy K to denounce various acts and discrimination inspired by racism and racialization. He positions himself on the side of those discriminated against, using the Arabic phrase "Inch'Allah" as a marker of this positioning. Talking about police abuse, he expresses his feelings based on real-life experiences of police brutality.

In another song on the same mixtape, "*Les points sur les i*" ["Dotting the I's"], Daddy K looks back at the negative criticism directed at Benny B by a part of the hip hop movement:

[181] See *Aggro.TV* (1994), "Freestyle – NAS/H-Posse – Folge 22 – 90's flashback (official version AggroTV)" (starting from 21:15).

[182] Compilation of commercially released and/or original tracks for distribution outside official channels, formerly on cassette, now on the Internet. An essential element of hip hop culture before the advent of the Internet, the mixtape existed before the first singles and was more practical than vinyl for spreading music quickly, thanks to the ease of listening and copying it offered (Bertot 2012: 74, 392).

You're doing hip hop, you're criticizing the top/ You've been rapping for four years now you're a big man

No really please find out/ But know that in the 80s when I was breaking you were just a kid

And know that today man, you're acting like a kid/ Totally into what I do, totally into the Zulu Nation

For fifteen years I've been giving myself over to hip hop, period/ I know, I know, I'm doing commercial: 'oh oh'

Forget the gossip and come fill my fridge/ Business, as you say, hasn't made me rich

It allows me to live and eat

The track is an answer from Daddy K to his detractors. He talks about his involvement in hip hop since the early 1980s as a way of reminding them that he is one of its pioneers in Belgium ("I was breaking,"* in French: "*je breakais*"), and that he is very proud of it. Referring more specifically to the commercial aspect of some of his songs, he simply says that it was a way to earn money, "fill the fridge," and live decently. In this way, he defends his authentic hip hop practice and reveals that his lived reality is more complex than the public image attributed to him.

In the song "*Je transvase (remix)*" ["I'm Decanting (Remix)"], released on a 1996 album called *Le rap appartient à ceux qui y pensent* [*Rap Belongs to Those Who Think About It*] on Virgin Music (owned by Universal Music Group), by the Brussels rapper Defi J (& The Def Rock Posse), the latter rapped the following lyrics in the third verse: "*For Rumky, for Defi, for all the posses/ I take what separates us and here is what unites us/ Above all class, all color, all prejudice in all misunderstanding/ Yes, rap is engraved in my life, yes, I abuse it*." Defi J, as usual, claims here that the practice of rap is a way to overcome all kinds of prejudices and social categorizations, such as those related to class or skin color.

In another song called "*Tant de haine*" ["So Much Hate"], Defi J asserts the following lyrics in the third verse: "*Keep your contempt, haven't you figured out yet/ That the more you criticize me, the more I rap, write and deny you/ Claim the respect that's lacking with the strength of a gang/ Shooting sentences like shells without butchery to reach my goals/ Yes I rap with authority even if it means being content with minorities/ Sharp-eared, accustomed to discrimination for many years*," before another rapper (whose accent seems rather Francophone) starts rapping in English. These lyrics allow Defi J to affirm his adherence to the practice and respect of rap music and the values derived from hip hop culture that he himself

seems to ascribe to it (e.g., respect, determination, non-violence, resistance). He also points out that his rap is primarily aimed at minority groups, whose experience of discrimination makes them more likely to understand the general message of his music. This perspective can be paralleled with the one defended by the legendary French rapper Kery James and his group Ideal J two years later in the famous song "*Si je rappe ici*" ["If I Rap Here"] (composed by DJ Medhi; R.I.P.), as its outro highlights: "*Bringing better days to my people, changing their daily lives/ Holding out my hand to them, my heart on my hand/ I represent/ It's all I've got left/ From my texts, my artworks, rain down my tears and my blood/ Will only understand those who must understand* [x2]." Before continuing: "*If I rap here/ It's for free/ Not here to do the Zulu*." These lyrics attest to Kery James's unwavering commitment to socially conscious rap, denouncing injustice and inequality (which in no way prevents the artist from exploring all the creative facets of rap music).

One year later, the Brussels band Big Shot released the track "*La case des 27 S*" ["The Panel of the 27 S"] on the CD compilation *Calmage*, produced with the independent label 9mm Recordz created by De Puta Madre. This song is about the alleged existence of a group of people, a kind of economic and politico-social elite called "the panel of the 27 secrets," who would have infiltrated all sectors of power in society to advance their own agenda designed to capture wealth and control people. Speaking about racial hierarchy and the invention of racism in the second verse, the rapper Preachamat says:

To a race apart and superior they claim to belong/ To immortality, their only weakness, they aspire
That's why they infest the Earth with drugs and viruses/ That they create wars and racism in a single process […]
And this with the approval of an indoctrinated people/ Divided into communities for better control/
You must not be fooled, the human race has been fooled by pecuniary greed/ Of its fellows, it is pitiful

The artist articulates his interpretation of certain phenomena and social problems, asserting that they are rather deliberate manifestations orchestrated by a secret group in positions of power. He continues by stating that humankind has been indoctrinated and divided by and for the

pursuit of economic profit, which can recall the historical development of racist and colonialist ideologies and projects.

Still in 1997, the rap group Starflam, comprising members from H-Posse and Malfrats Linguistiques (joined by two new members from Liège, the rappers Kaer and L'Enfant Pavé), released their first (eponymous) album. Kaer and L'Enfant Pavé were already featured on the track "*Opération Starflam*" ["Starflam Operation"] by Malfrats Linguistiques, released the same year on the compilation *Phat Unda Compil* and produced with Souterrain Production. This song announced the arrival and reconstitution of Malfrats Linguistiques and H-Posse as Starflam, with Kaer rapping: "*Starflam, coming live to your Walkman* [a portable audio player brand]," knowing that the word "starflam" is a French anagram of the word "*malfrats*", which can be translated by "thugs" in English.

Starflam's first single from their eponymous album is called "*La corde raide* ["The Tightrope"] and talks about some contradictions of an unequal societal system in which the two rappers featured (Seg and Baloji) are forced to act like "funambulists" on a "tightrope." In the second verse, Baloji raps:

So, instead of rotting in my biz, I elaborate some texts/ Some rhymes and metaphors that are more than just a pretext for
Covet anything other than what my neighbor has/ So that I don't stagnate, as if I were in the dump [in French: "bled"], but to*
Get away, countering, thwarting deception/ Of a system that uses us just to look good
Example: to pay our taxes we are Belgian citizens/ But to have the right to vote there, the state reject us
And from our torpor, the beast rejoices

With these lyrics, Baloji explains his desire to use his art as a means of freeing himself from a system that would manipulate him when necessary. In so doing, he echoes the famous formula "no taxation without representation," used by the American colonists against Great Britain during the American Revolution, and identifies himself as a member of a somehow socially excluded group of people in Belgium, the African descent people. Besides, the fact that Baloji considers the state to be a "beast" can be seen as a reminiscent of the work of Thomas Hobbes

when comparing the power of the state over people using the biblical monster the Leviathan as the allegorical image. At the end of the song, he says:

Even if these rhymes are but a grain of sand in the front of buildings/ The goal is achieved, as long as they lead to reflection
And lead to mutiny through the intellect because/ The fist is only effective when the mind is injected into it to
Think long-term, look beyond the system/ Mastering the gears so that the beast no longer holds us down

At the very end of another song on the same album, "*Fusion organisée*" ["Organized Merger"], Baloji intervenes in a kind of spoken outro/interlude:

Wait a minute, every moment you're trying to stand up straight again, you see, you're trying to readjust yourself, you see, to get out of the margins, out of all that bullshit. Why are those sons of bitches holding you back? Why have we been waiting 15 years for our documents to become Belgian? Dude, how do you explain this? I've been waiting 15 years to become a Belgian and when are they going to grant it to me? Never, or what?

A final track from this album can be mentioned here. Called "*Ce plat pays*" ["This Flat Country"], this song "describes the situation in Belgium in the 1990s, referring to [famous Belgian songwriter] Jacques Brel's classic ['*Le plat pays*']," as one contributor on the Genius platform noted. The song's lyrics attest to the determination of the rappers to tackle the sociopolitical context of 1990s Belgium, as shown by Seg's lyrics:

Belgium mortgaged like a Monopoly game/ As for vox populi, it was abolished a long time ago
How can we hope for the unity of a country/ When it owes its survival solely to its debt […]
That crooked politicians act with impunity/ Untroubled under the cloak of immunity
A two-speed democracy (two speeds)/ When the right to vote becomes a duty, that's where the problem lies […]
Let's talk about the north-south (north-south) climate that threatens/ A democracy already undermined by a political class
At the center of too much controversy and criticism/ Public opinion calls for change
May heads roll for meddling vice/ Calls for amalgamation of culprits and transparency

The rapper explains his analysis of the situation in Belgium at the time and looks back on some of the country's major economic and sociopolitical debates, such as those on the public debt in a neoliberal economy, the disconnection of political elites from the population and the loss of legitimacy of the ruling political class, the corruption and mismanagement in politics, and the linguistic and community tensions between the Francophone and Flemish parts of the country. In the same way, in the song "Stressact" released by the duo Bienvenu-N-Sonar (comprising the rapper Bienvenu and the DJ Sonar) on the compilation *Phat Unda Compil*, Bienvenu, of sub-Saharan African descent and living in the city of Huy (in the Liège region), raps: "*It was foretold that as an immigrant I would be wronged/ My escape rests on the pen and inkwell […]/ Shit, the crisis is setting in, we're packing our bags/ Refugees and undocumented migrants represent the bad*." Addressing the theme of human migration, the rapper highlights its rejection and its instrumentalization for political purposes. In this regard, it is interesting to note that racism and discrimination against migrant people is characterized by its ability to combine several factors to express its desire for exclusion (skin color, national or ethnic origin, religious beliefs, etc.). This reveals a contemporary form of racism in which several criteria are combined to justify exclusion and inequalities against those targeted, creating a broad spectrum of intersectional discrimination (ENAR 2016).

In this regard, a tragic event would shock many people in Belgium and beyond at the end of 1998. Semira Adamu, an asylum seeker of Nigerian origin born in 1978 and present in Belgium since 1996, was killed during a forced eviction attempt. She had fled to Belgium to escape a forced marriage and was placed in a "closed center"[183] upon her arrival. Her application for asylum had been rejected and she resisted five attempts to expel her from Belgian territory. The sixth attempt proved fatal while she was suffocated to death by two gendarmes who applied the "cushion technique," a controversial method of subduing recalcitrant people used by police officers during forced eviction at the time, consisting of applying a cushion to the mouth of a person in order to silence screaming and crying.[184] Her death, or murder according to some, sent shockwaves through Belgium and the rest of the world, sparking protests and mobilizations

[183] The administrative detention centers in Belgium, or closed centers, are six places of detention managed by the state and designed for undocumented foreigners (i.e., immigrant people without proper documents and subject to removal measures in accordance with the migratory policies in Belgium). The system of closed centers in Belgium has been denounced by human rights activists as a serious attack on the individual freedoms and fundamental rights of migrant people, as well as a tool for the criminalization of migrants (Barbabianca and Laurain 2019).

[184] Eight people were assigned to escort Semira Adamu onto the plane, but she resisted and the plane's passengers came to her defense to stop the expulsion attempt. After the cushion technique was used on her, she fell into a coma and was transferred to hospital, where she died a few hours later.

against police violence and abuse, as well as against restrictive migration policies. The cushion technique, which recalls the knee-on-the-neck technique that would lead to George Floyd's death in the US in 2020, was subsequently banned and the Minister of the Interior resigned on September 25, 1998, three days after Adamu's death.

Following these events, DJ HMD, a Belgian-Moroccan hip hop and R&B DJ from Rebecq (a municipality located near the Brussels Region),[185] released a mixtape aimed at denouncing the violence and abuses committed by the Belgian forces of law and order. He explained in a media interview:

> For me, this tape will always be my pride […] By word of mouth, I put out a call to all DJs, all rappers, young or old, Flanders, Brussels, Wallonia, anyone who wanted to take part could come and drop a verse and a chorus. I made no distinction between good and bad, known and unknown. I had all the big names of the time and some youngsters, some of whom are still with us. Others weren't as good, but that didn't matter, because my aim was to give everyone a chance. I've had great feedback, even in France! (Schmitz 2016: n.p.)

The mixtape is called *Les gens d'armes* and offers a substantial sample of socially conscious Francophone Belgian rap. The title of the mixtape is a play on words referring to the original medieval French expression for "gendarmes," or "people of arms" in English. In Belgium, the Gendarmerie was an armed military police force that had existed since 1830 and was abolished in 2001 following reform. The mixtape cover features an illustration of a chicken behind which a multitude of pistol barrels are pointed, as if the chicken was about to be shot. This is understandable in view of the French slang expression "*les poulets*," which literally translates into English as "the chickens," while being actually the equivalent of the slang expression "the pigs."[186] This cover, as well as the title of the mixtape, are intended to announce and assert the militant and socially conscious side of this project by mobilizing codes used in hip hop culture, in this case making fun of police forces to denounce their abuses of power and violent practices.

On side A of the mixtape, starting at 25:45, several excerpts from what appears to be regional television news are used to evoke the Semira Adamu case. An initial extract sums up the case

[185] DJ HMD used to go to the Kokelberg basilica, where the dancers were cyphering, and participated in the first meetings of the Universal Zulu Nation Belgian Chapter. He started releasing mixtapes in 1994 with a series of projects called "Illegal Mixtapes" (see *DjTv* (2010), "Interview deejay HMD").

[186] Note that the French expression "*les porcs*," which is the literal translation of "the pigs," can also be used to designate police forces in French.

in a few broad strokes, before the voice of another journalist says that "according to certain testimonies, Semira was beaten by the gendarmes." The last excerpts are taken from the press conference held to announce her death. A representative of the forces of law and order can be heard declaring that "normal procedure" had been used, a statement counterbalanced by the intervention of other voices, presumably from normal citizens. One of them considers the police officers involved in the case to be "bastards," while another one explains: "I think we've gone beyond acceptable limits, we've now reached the point of assassination." Finally, a scratch sample from the rapper Sat l'Artificier of the iconic 1990s French group from Marseille called Fonky Family is used by DJ HMD. This is an extract from the song "*Le respect se perd*" ["Respect Gets Lost"], from the classic first album of the Fonky Family called *Si dieu veut… (Inch'Allah)* [*If God Wills… (Inch'Allah)*], in which Sat says: "It's getting shit around my place."[187] These examples show how hip hop DJs can participate directly in the dissemination of messages aimed at social criticism with the specific aesthetic codes and techniques from their artistic discipline.

Sides A and B of the mixtape contain a lot of other lyrics or scratches aiming at denouncing the abuses, violence, and social exclusion that some of the population face in Belgium, namely people of color. Racism and racial considerations within the police forces are particularly targeted, as are some politicians and/or some people involved in politics and their ideologies, such as the members and supporters of the political party National Front (and by extension all fascist, racist, and far-right parties). Specific public policies are also the subject of critical consideration, such as the immigration and "integration/inclusion" ones: "*I don't have a tooth against them, but a whole jaw/ Young rebel? No, no, just an angry youth/ After racial insults and abusive police checks/ We're still being asked to keep our nerves in check*"; "*I'm the swarthy kid who hasn't been tamed according to society/ The dirty immigrant from head to toe, completely abandoned/ Identity check and the way I dress, or my métis head* [see "*métissage*"*]/ *Integration, a conspiracy against my generation […] They call me the dirty nigger*"; "*Cops are an asset for the National Front, which recruits a few pigs to turn them into jackals*."

[187] The lyrics continue as follows on the original song: "Unemployment, AIDS, or anxiety/ Filled cells from the Baumettes to Fresnes [i.e., French prisons]/ The Nazi Front [i.e., National Front, a French far-right political party] increases its score/ Poster boys feel strong and leave a poor young man dead/ The rich get richer, live happily among themselves/ The poor get poorer, eat each other, nervous."

In this political climate, one of the major figures of socially conscious Belgian hip hop, Rival Capone from the crew CNN199, released his first official album. While major labels were not regularly present in the Francophone Belgian rap world of the time, the project was released by Sony Music Entertainment (via Epic). Released in 1999, *De la rue à la scène* [*From Street to Stage*] left its mark in Francophone rap music thanks to its militant and socially critical side, as well as its rooting in and promotion of hip hop. The project fits perfectly with what some consider to be the golden age of Francophone rap music and hip hop culture and testifies to the impact and popularity of Rival and CNN199 within the movement at the time.

For example, in the track "*L'indélébile tras* [sic]" ["The Indelible Print"], Rival raps: "*National Front breaks the country/ Today riots, tomorrow a civil war/ No one is safe, on all the roofs falls the rain*." In another track, "*Rien ne va plus*" ["Nothing Goes Right Anymore"], he says: "*You will understand that it's not for the style that we claim: 'fuck police and politics' […] Don't do it for me but for hip hop and its people […] The world seems so dark sometimes, we hang on to what we find/ For me it's hip hop to open the eye, the mind and the heart*". The track "*Loin*" ["Far"] features the French rapper Akhenaton, who is also an emblematic figure in the French music scene, particularly for socially conscious rap. Speaking to the Francophone and global hip hop community, the latter raps: "*That we've been right for a long time/ And some people are taking it easy/ But us in their eyes full of shit we remain just another Zulus*." Indeed, in the chorus of "*Mourir au top*" ["Die at the Top"] featuring Defi J from BRC, Rival insists on his belonging to the hip hop culture: "*Before rap, I represent hip hop/ Live below everything but die at the top […] Underground rebellion, BRC, CNN*."

The musical production style of these songs falls within the sub-genre of "boom bap" (which can now be described as "old school"). It emerged in New York and spread throughout the East Coast of the US. Boom bap is characterized by a main drum loop where the bass drum hits the first and third beats of a four-beat measure at around 90 BPM, while the snare drum hits the second and fourth beats, thus defining the strong (bass drum) and weak (snare drum) beats of this hip hop sub-genre (while being a general codification that can be interpreted in various ways). The term "boom bap" is therefore an onomatopoeic representation of the sounds produced by the bass drum ("boom") and snare drum ("bap") of the rhythm section. One or more samples (which may come from soul, funk, jazz, blues, disco, rock, folk, classical, pop, etc.) and/or one or more instruments are then added to this initial rhythmic loop (or inversely)

in order to produce a complete musical loop with a catchy melody that will form the backbone of the structure of the composition.

In addition, boom bap-specific audio composition and mixing often includes a layer of sound effects added to the melodic and/or rhythmic sections, as well as a desire to avoid over-smooth and over-processing of the mix's correction details in order to give it a certain raw character and allow the sound imperfections of the samples and instruments used to come through. This deliberate emphasis on the auditory imperfections of sounds and sonic grit within musical compositions can be interpreted as a reflection of the socio-economic hardships inherent to the origins of hip hop. This aesthetic seems deeply rooted in the realities of "the street" and the systemic impact of racial discrimination—environments that leave little room for artifice or illusion. Consequently, this context is manifested in the musical composition and signal/sound processing themselves, which serve to reinforce the narratives and messages conveyed by the artists' lyrics. At a time when home computers were not widely available and were not powerful enough for advanced music production, these musical composition codes proved to be relatively accessible because they did not require substantial, extremely technical, and very expensive musical equipment. It is therefore not surprising that boom bap dominated much of 1990s global hip hop music, and, of course, continues to be used to this day, despite the present domination of the genre "trap," or "new school," in global rap music production.

The lyrics and the musical production approach of these songs provide a synthetic overview of the majority direction taken by the art world of Francophone Belgian rap at the time. It was a rap that was protest-oriented, militant, assertive, and rooted in the sociopolitical, cultural and economic realities of Belgium at the time. The general artistic direction of Francophone Belgian rap in the 1990s was socially conscious, with artists who wanted to maintain a certain artistic freedom in the way they performed these protest and critical messages, while asserting their belonging and promoting hip hop as a way of life and a means of reacting within and against a political and social system deemed unfair to certain people, particularly racialized groups. We have seen that a debate arose around the commercial success of Benny B, with the tension or balance between authenticity and commodification as a guiding principle. The 1990s saw the art world of Francophone Belgian rap and hip hop culture diversify with the appearance of new groups and their respective crews, mainly in Liège and Brussels, as well as other cities.

Regarding the structuring of this art world in the early 2000s, the analysis shows that the situation since the early 1990s has not changed much, except that rap music artists have continued to create and develop their own production structures, so as to be able to create their projects independently and without necessarily having to involve technical collaborators in the creation of their works, or without various sponsors outside the hip hop movement being involved in partnerships. In keeping with the developments in Chapter 7, I discuss in the next chapter the ways through which actors in the implementation of youth cultural policy may have been involved in the development of hip hop culture and rap music in Francophone Belgium in the 1990s and early 2000s. Unlike the French case, professional publishers and broadcasters linked to the music industry were not acting regularly in chains of cooperation within this art world, with some exceptions such as with the group Benny B or Rival's album *De la rue à la scène*. These findings show that the art world of Francophone Belgian rap in the 1990s can be described as underground, as it was not yet integrated into a professional and industrial music distribution circuit, which limits the audience and the level of popular attention, while at the same time limiting the opportunities of the artists for more independent professional development. This situation remains the same as that described by rapper Baloji in his 1994 interview with H-Posse for the German TV show.

Nevertheless, at a time when "Belgian rap releases are still very rare" (*Lezarts Urbains* 2008: 25), the mixtape format and its increasing use would enable artists to distribute their work on a smaller scale but in a significant way. Following the example of DJ HMD, other artists produce and diffuse mixtapes, helping to keep the movement alive and allowing artists to become better known. In the US, the mixtape industry developed rapidly, enabling some rappers to develop a professional career thanks to a distribution network parallel to the professionalized music industry and conventional sales networks. It was during a trip to New York in 1990 that DJ HMD discovered this parallel network, as he explains during a filmed interview in 2010: "Actually, I'm the first to have *marketed*[188] mixtapes […] But mixtapes were already being made back then for friends […] I went to New York, I flashed when I saw the industry it was."[189] After acquiring the necessary equipment, he began marketing himself and his own mixtapes totally independently in the mid-1990s. If the territory of Francophone Belgium does not allow

[188] DJ HMD insists on this specific term.

[189] See *DjTv* (2010), "Interview deejay HMD" (starting from 2:05).

for the creation of a parallel and viable mixtape industry, DJ HMD will demonstrate the possibility of developing ways to ensure a minimum distribution of works:

> I was in charge of music at basketball promo tournaments, and there I started distributing [mixtapes] on demand. Then stores became interested. At some point, I created a network. I sold in small local sports stores, then night-shops, clothing stores... I was the only one putting mixtapes on the street in Brussels, at least until '96 (in Schmitz 2016: n.p.).

These considerations, based on the art world concept, show that the creation of new artistic production networks and the use of a distribution format such as the mixtape have enabled artists to gain greater independence and continue to develop and promote the hip hop movement and rap music, despite a structural lack of integration into professional music distribution. In so doing, the movement has continued to develop according to a certain majority convention shared by all in terms of artistic approach, that of using and claiming hip hop culture and rap music as a platform for denunciation, protest, and the dissemination of critical messages with a sociopolitical scope relating to issues of social justice and equality. Given the cultural origins of rap music, the social themes most closely associated with racialized and minority groups (racial discrimination, social exclusion, political instrumentalization) appear central to these messages, to which are added a general critique of the political and economic system and sometimes a more specific criticism of certain political parties, instruments, or ideologies. This can then be paralleled with the definition of rap proposed to me by Jérémy Piolat, musician and rapper, and member of the French group Hydra, during a semi-structured interview in 2023: "Rap, I'd say [...] is really the union of rhythm and dance and meaning […] lyrics that make sense, that move, that can convey revolt or anger, or disgust, or depression," considering finally that hip hop is "a country truly open to all." However, he qualified this by speaking of authenticity and street credibility issues, which I continue to address in the analysis: "But you need to have these authentication papers. And the cops who do the checking are sometimes a pain, because at some point, for the flow, it's the work that pays, it's not whether you've done fifteen years in prison or a hold-up or not" (Piolat 2023: n.p.).

Chapter 9

The institutionalization of hip hop arts and culture within the youth cultural public policy in Francophone Belgium

This chapter continues to explore the use of hip hop culture and rap music for public cultural action aimed at young people in Francophone Belgium. Section 1 presents the projects analyzed in Section 2. I articulate this analysis with theoretical concepts such as street-level bureaucracy and notions related to the institutionalization and legitimization of so-called popular artistic practices.

Section 1

Development of substantial cultural public action projects using rap music and hip hop culture

Subtitle 1: The Youth Center Thier-à-Liège: The compilation *Fidèles au vinyl* and the "Musical Action Service"

In the early 1990s, two of the most recognized Belgian rap and graffiti groups emerged in Liège: Starflam (H-Posse at this time) and JNC. In 1993, H-Posse and the YC Thier-à-Liège partnered to produce the vinyl compilation *Fidèles au vinyl*, "the first rap record of Wallonia" (and the third released in Belgium). The Youth Centre Thier-à-Liège[190] was created in 1980 following a request from a group of youth to the neighborhood committee. The public authorities of the city put a room at the disposal of the young people and members of the district before making official a few months later the creation of a "Communal Centre of Young people and District", commonly called a "youth club" (Broché 2016: 164). When the brand new hip hop crew H-Posse asked the coordinator of the YC, Etienne Droussin, if it was possible to rehearse within it, the latter proposed that they work together to help H-Posse develop their musical projects. As H-Posse explained during the 1992 Rap Side Stories festival: "We have a Youth Centre in Thier-à-Liège, and the organizer has given us a room, so he can find us shows. It's largely

[190] The YC Thier-à-Liège is in the city of Liège, in the neighborhood Thier-à-Liège, an administrative district on the northern heights of the city. In 2015, the neighborhood had around 4,500 inhabitants (*City of Liège* 2015: 29). Historically, it is a working-class neighborhood still relatively rural and not so much urbanized that is now beginning to attract a new population looking to settle in places where real estate prices are affordable. Indeed, several heaps from former coalmines that were active during the Industrial Revolution until the 1960s surround the district and bear witness to the working-class memory of this district that had two coalmines, occupied by Walloon and then mainly Flemish and Italian workers, and a lot of small-scale farmers (see *RTC Télé-Liège* (2007), "Fête du Terril au Thier-à-Liège" (starting from 00.30)).

thanks to the Youth Centre that we're able to train regularly. Before that, we had to find a small courtyard to protect us from the rain, and generally, we couldn't find anything" (in *Lezarts Urbains* 1992: 77). Following the release of *Fidèles au vinyl*, the Street Bands Festival, "the first hip hop festival of Liège", was organized at the YC Thier-à-Liège (*Thier-à-Liège YC* 2014: 25).

Another interesting project for the analysis implemented by the YC Thier-à-Liège is the Musical Action Service (MAS), of which Etienne Droussin is also the founder and the main coordinator. MAS opened in 1996 dedicated to the support of young musicians and music projects. It offers access to two rehearsal spaces and one professional recording studio, with three sound engineers, during six days a week from 9am to 10pm. MAS also realizes sound engineering for live performances within the YC Thier-à-Liège buildings. As founder and main coordinator of MAS, Droussin explained to me that it was following a good experience with H-Posse that he created the project "*Premières prises*" ("First Takes") in 1996 for the recording of two compilations with six groups each year, and he officially created MAS on this basis two years later. At the beginning, the focus was on the recordings of musical projects without any further artistic support. If the core process and method are still the same, the project has evolved toward, at the present time, a more complete dynamic of artistic production through a more concrete supporting, accompanying, and follow-up of the artists. This last step about the follow-up and the diffusion of music is one that the project has embraced over recent years. Indeed, nowadays, the main purpose of the project is to propose a complete artistic production framework to artists who have not yet released many projects or who do not have access to good artistic production conditions:

> At the very beginning there was no artistic production, it was just recording, then we did some production and now we also want to provide a follow-up of the group to help them for the concerts, for the diffusion and all that. So that's how the project is evolving. The idea is to allow groups that have not yet released a lot of music to work on their production in the studio and to produce a quality product that will allow them to find stages (Droussin 2018: n.p.).

MAS also organizes meetings with diverse music professionals to implement its coaching and artistic development for young artists. Two, three, or four artists are selected each year to benefit from the studio with a sound engineer to produce an album or an EP/mixtape that will be released on 500 CD copies. Droussin explained that the artist selection process was collective and informal within MAS: "We go to see concerts, we meet people and then from time to time

one of us says, 'This could be an interesting band for a First Takes project.' Then we listen to the stuff here and discuss it, we each have our own niche" (Droussin 2018: n.p.). To vary the musical genres, the MAS team selects only one artist/group by genre each year.

Subsection 2: "Urban Cultures" festivals and the cultural and lifelong education not-for-profit organizations Afrokore and Lezarts Urbains

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a not-for-profit organization called Afrokore organized several cultural and hip hop events in Liège and Brussels including festivals, creative workshops, conferences, advocacy campaigns, and exhibitions (*Lezarts Urbains* 2000: 166). During a public debate in 2000 (see below), Panther, a member of Afrokore representing the association, explained how the organization "works in [the] sociocultural action field" in collaboration with dedicated hip hop organizations such as Souterrain Production:

> Firstly, interculturality: this involves encouraging and supporting the responsible civic involvement of young people from African immigrant backgrounds. Secondly, urban cultures: promoting and energizing innovative artistic creation in popular and multicultural environments as a framework for informal education and socio-professional integration (in *Lezarts Urbains* 2000: 127).

He then briefly described its objectives: "We use hip hop as a tool to combat racism, promote social and professional integration, and work towards justice." He goes on to explain:

> In relation to these three themes, there are a whole host of means and levers at the level of public institutions. There are also resources and aids available from companies. The question is how to really tap into these funds, these aids, and meet these expectations, to take things a little further (ibid.: 128).

In 1998 and 1999, Afrokore organized an "urban cultures" three-day festival in Liège called "Kulturbaines" in collaboration with the intercultural relations aldermanship and the Cultural Center of Chênée.[191] During the event, a special day called "Hip Hopismes" aimed to promote the development of hip hop with rap bands, graffiti artists, and skaters from Liège, Mons, Flanders, and France. From an article about the festival written by the Chênée Cultural Center, "[hip hop culture] is an integral part of the free and innovative cultures that are emerging and developing in the streets of our Western cities. This is what we call urban cultures" (Chênée

[191] Chênée is an administrative district of the city of Liège.

Cultural Center 1998: n.p.). The other two days of the festival were devoted to raising awareness on the issue of racial discrimination in the US and Europe, through an exhibition called "Martin Luther King and Civil Rights," a roundtable discussion and the screening of two documentaries, *Power to the People* and *Black Power*. The exhibition took place at the Chiroux Cultural Center and the roundtable discussion in the main building of the University of Liège in the city center. According to Panther, bringing this story to light can fuel the fight against racism and the establishment of "a cultural society where, like the [Rosa Parks] bus, everyone has their place" (Bodeux: 1998).

This approach is in line with the corporate purpose of Afrokore. As explained in Chapter 3, the perspectives of the first descendants of sub-Saharan immigrants in Belgium are characterized by a desire for long-term settlement and recognition in their country of birth. Therefore, people from this generation sometimes take action in various organizations aimed at fostering and fulfilling this aspiration. Afrokore can be placed in this category for its cultural, artistic, educational, and socioeconomic activities: "its corporate purpose is twofold: firstly, to promote and support the expression, dissemination and publication of innovative or distinctive artistic trends stemming from urban cultures, in particular hip-hop (rap, graf and break); secondly, to seek ways and means of fostering the socio-economic integration of young people from African immigrant backgrounds" (Kagné 2001: 41). As the promotion of hip hop culture is at the heart of this association's objectives, I analyze its position on the use of hip hop as a tool for public action in more detail below.

In spring 1999, an event dedicated to hip hop culture was organized in the Saint-Gilles municipality of Brussels. In partnership with several Youth Center Federations in Francophone Belgium, along with the hip hop culture organizations Souterrain Production and the UZN Belgian Chapter, the festival "*Printemps Hip Hop* [Hip Hop Spring]" comprised a program of three coordinated components: "two dance workshops in popular areas," "an improvement camp," and "a day of meetings and scenic presentations." The event was part of a cultural public action program led by the Brussels cultural and lifelong education not-for-profit organization Fondation Jacques Gueux, which would become Lezarts Urbains. This program was aimed at "working-class neighborhoods, youth centers, associations, socio-cultural and cultural networks, in close liaison with the hip-hop movement, networking, reflection and artistic maturation in relation to hip-hop forms of expression" (*Lezarts Urbains* 1999: 158). The meetings and stage performances enabled over a hundred young people from the participating

YCs to present their artistic creations in the sold-out hall of the Cultural Center Jacques Franck. A debate was also held, attended by around 70 people, on "the question of hip-hop in youth centers and the relationship between hip-hop and 'official' institutions." Following this event, Lezarts Urbains decided to organize another festival in 2000, the "International Festival of Urban Cultures" at the Halles de Schaerbeek (ibid.: 159).

Lezarts Urbains was founded in 1977 (under the name Fondation Jacques Gueux) with the aim of "promoting popular and working-class cultures, for the sake of social emancipation and cultural democracy."[192] The original name was a reference to a singer of Belgian popular songs involved in social struggles at the beginning of the 20th century called Charles Guillaume a.k.a. Jacques Gueux. As the organization explains on its website, the beginning of the 1990s saw "popular expression and its many artistic forms evolved considerably. The social divide and cultural cross-fertilization generated the Hip Hop movement (rap, break dancing, graffiti, deejaying...); new artistic expressions opened up the field of 'urban cultures'."[193] As Lapiower (in Vallet 2012: n.p.), when talking about the emergence of hip hop in Belgium, explains:

> Hip-hop was first introduced by the French media. A whole generation of young people recognized themselves in this black youth culture from the Bronx. In Brussels, Liège and, later, Charleroi. There was a cultural sensitivity in this milieu. But there was no possibility of crystallizing this culture, which nobody saw and which was not really considered a culture. On the contrary, the first articles on the subject in the Belgian media expressed a profound contempt for hip-hop. Back then, there was no scene. There were messages on the walls. People thought it was Arabic.

Interested by such a dynamic, the organization took an interest in hip hop and worked with artists and groups to "help their recognition but also to contribute to their development."[194] The 1992 Rap Side Stories festival, which led to one of the first books about the hip hop movement in Francophone Belgium, is one of the historic events of this period, along with two other major events, the festival Lezarts Hip Hop in 1997 and the International Festival of Urban Cultures in 2000, both at the Halles de Schaerbeek. The 1997 festival "brought together almost the entire Francophone Belgian hip hop scene," with guests including the French group Suprême NTM and Afrika Bambaataa (Lapiower and Van der Hoeven 2018: 328). The 2000 festival aimed to "refocus attention on the richness and maturation of urban cultures in Belgium," notably in

[192] See *Lezarts Urbains* (n. d.), "Historique."
[193] See *Lezarts Urbains* (n. d.), "Historique."
[194] See *Lezarts Urbains* (n. d.), "Historique."

partnership with Souterrain Production and the UZN Belgian Chapter (*Lezarts Urbains*: 2000: 165).

Since the beginning of the 2000s, the organization has decided to devote itself exclusively to "urban cultures" and thus to hip hop. This resulted in a change of name in 2004, to Lezarts Urbains, and a renewal of the organization's statutes and charter in 2005. Today, Lezarts Urbains is a recognized state-subsidized cultural and lifelong education organization "focusing on urban cultures and artistic practices from working-class backgrounds. Active in the socio-artistic field of urban cultures, and hip hop in particular, it works with a number of partners on a wide range of activities, including support for artistic projects, the organization of events, discussion, training and workshops."[195]

Section 2

Institutionalizing hip hop arts and culture through street-level bureaucracy and sociocultural action?

The presentation of these projects leads us now to the analysis of their contribution to youth cultural policy using hip hop and especially rap music in Francophone Belgium. Mobilizing the "street-level bureaucrat" concept helps me to highlight the critical role of the implementing agents in the uses of hip hop for public intervention. In the framework of public policy analysis and its often so-called bottom-up approaches, Michael Lipsky (1980) has emphasized "the critical role of street-level bureaucrats" for the implementation of policies. His work has shown that the actions of implementing agents can be decisive in the functioning of public services: "when taken together the individual decisions of these workers become, or add up to, agency policy." These "street level bureaucrats" are then defined as "[p]ublic service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work," and "[p]ublic service agencies that employ a significant number of street-level bureaucrats in proportion to their work force are called street-level bureaucracies" (Lipsky [1980] 2010: 3). As such, the image of the field bureaucrat as envisaged by Lipsky differs from the important point of reference provided by Weber's work on these issues. In contrast to the "depersonalized civil servant who dispassionately carries out orders,"

[195] See *Lezarts Urbains* (n. d.), "A propos."

the street-level bureaucrat is "in interaction with people, and must decide and act within a given context that gives him or her room for maneuver" (Achermann 2018: 19).

While these concepts were developed in the frame of the analysis of formal administration and not necessarily not-for-profit organizations, they can give precious clues for analyzing youth cultural policy using hip hop in Francophone Belgium by highlighting links between public action, cultural operators in not-for-profit organizations, and hip hop artists. Indeed, if the organizations responsible for implementing this cultural policy are initially born out of citizens' initiatives, they become bound by the legal instruments governing their operating sector when they obtain recognition and subsidies from the relevant authorities. As explained in Chapter 7, youth cultural policy in Francophone Belgium is based on the principle of subsidizing non-governmental organizations, mainly YCs such as the YC Thier-à-Liège and its MAS, but also more general cultural organizations based on the notion of lifelong education, such as the associations Afrokore and Lezarts Urbains. The people working in the organizations recognized by this public policy can therefore be considered as the primary field agents of its implementation, in regular contact with the target public and accountable to the relevant administrative and political authorities, as I explain in the following subsection.

Subsection 1: Making hip hop a tool for public action: The critical role of implementing agents

As mentioned in Chapter 7, the sector mainly responsible for the implementation of youth cultural policy of the Federation Wallonia-Brussels is the Youth Sector. This implies a chain of command in which the YCs have to seek accreditation from the leading administrative actors of youth cultural policy in Francophone Belgium: the General Service for Lifelong Education and Youth (and the Direction of Youth) and the General Service of the Inspection of Culture, themselves dependents of the General Administration of Culture under the competence of the Minister of Culture. The General Service for Lifelong Education and Youth (and the Direction of Youth) and the General Service of the Inspection of Culture review the YCs' accreditation and grant applications depending on a specific allocated budget. Without this accreditation, a structure dedicated to youth cultural development cannot receive the four-year structural subvention that allows all of the (officially recognized) YCs to implement their action and engage people for daily work and/or specific projects.

Cultural and lifelong education organizations, such as Lezarts Urbains or Afrokore, are also included in this chain of command as the General Service for Lifelong Education is included in the same department as the Youth Sector, which is then under the General Administration of Culture, the latter not being in direct contact with the target group. The legal instrument governing the operation of the Lifelong Education Sector is a decree adopted in 2003 and last amended in 2021 (hereafter the 2003 Decree). Article 1 stipulates that its purpose is to support associations whose approach is "in line with a perspective of equality and social progress, with a view to building a fairer, more democratic and more cohesive society that fosters encounters between cultures through the development of active, critical citizenship and cultural democracy."[196] The 2003 Decree applies to any not-for-profit organization, youth or otherwise, "focused on the exercise of social and political citizenship within a democratic public space" (Broché 2016: 74).

In the case of YCs, the granting of the accreditation is conditioned upon the approval of a file called a "four-year plan," which is supposed to explain the main lines of the activities and action of the requesting organization for the next four years. A cultural inspector is then mainly responsible for "verifying on site the compliance of the operators with the requirements defined in the legal systems to which they belong, to participate in the evaluation of their actions and to assist them" (General Service of the Inspection of Culture 2024: n.p.). Applying this to youth cultural policy involves the "Inspection of Culture" having to review at least every four years the plan of YCs vis-à-vis the 2000 Decree and decide whether each YC can still benefit from its accreditation and subventions.

Regular YCs are ruled by a governing board and a general assembly, like all not-for-profit organizations in Belgium. The governing board gives a mandate to a qualified YC coordinator to manage the actions, the animation team, the administration, and the infrastructures. The YC coordinator is thus responsible for framing and guaranteeing the achievements of the projects and the actions elaborated in the four-year plan with regard to the main purpose of the 2000 Decree, which is to develop "CRACS" within a specific sociocultural framing. This public policy leaves flexibility to its recognized implementing agents since they will elaborate,

[196] The object is defined as follows: "the development of lifelong education activities in the field of associative life, aimed at critical analysis of society, the stimulation of democratic and collective initiatives, the development of active citizenship and the exercise of civil and political, social, economic, cultural and environmental rights, with a view to the individual and collective emancipation of the public, giving priority to the active participation of target audiences and cultural expression."

schedule, budget, and evaluate the concrete plan that must deliver the purpose of the policy. The situation is similar for organizations recognized in the field of lifelong education. They must first apply for recognition in principle, assessed by the same service and, if approved, this will lead to the submission of an application for recognition for three years. After a positive evaluation of this three-year recognition, the service then grants permanent recognition.

The internal functioning of lifelong education organizations is governed in the same way as the YCs, since they must firstly be recognized as not-for-profit organizations. The 2003 Decree provides for four areas of action in which organizations can be recognized, with a maximum of two simultaneously. The first concerns "civic participation, education and training," the second concerns the training of organizers and operators, the third includes services and research tools, and the fourth concerns public awareness and information. As per the institutional recognition of YCs, lifelong education organizations must apply for recognition to the authorities, in compliance with the terms of the 2003 Decree governing their activities. This application must contain a five- or three-year action plan that the organization undertakes to develop to comply with the missions it has set itself under article 1 of the Decree.

Coming back to Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy analytical model, we see that the substantial discretion of street-level bureaucrats in their interactions with those targeted by a public action appears to be one of the central elements of their work (Achermann 2018: 18). There are several reasons for this situation, starting with the inherent complexity of reality on the ground in the implementation of policies. Indeed, policymakers cannot anticipate everything when developing policies and the agents often work in social situations that are too complex to fit into strict bureaucratic formats. The rules formulated in public policy may appear to be too precise and binding or else too imprecise and ambiguous or even contradictory. While these findings do not detract from the fact that some implementation tasks (particularly those related to hierarchical control) take place in a highly regulated framework, it leaves some space for discretion and sometimes a selective use of implementation rules to the agents responsible for the concrete execution of a policy. The street-level bureaucrats can therefore occupy this space through their own professional skills, giving them a kind of room for maneuver and the possibility of negotiating themselves certain terms of the policies of which they are in charge. They can thus have some concrete "policymaking role" through the arrangement of their daily professional practices within the framework of inter-individual relations (Dubois 2015: 51–52). In this way, the "practices" and "decisions" of these executing agents enable them to implement

public policies and determine their "content and direction" (Achermann 2018: 18). The discretion of these agents is built around the practice of arranging and around the will to actively engage in the definition of concrete content of public policy. It is a matter of highlighting "the way in which administrative officers, including those in junior positions, can decide and not only execute" (Dubois 2010: 275).

This approach makes it possible to strongly nuance the image that would represent a very much depersonalized bureaucrat with a totally passive user. The 'theatrical metaphor' would be best suited to characterize the relationships between the formal definitions of a policy, with "the scene," and "the behind the scenes, a place of practical organization, where one does what we can, but always out of sight" (Dubois 2010: 276). This discretionary power of the street-level bureaucrat and the features that explain it is called an "implementation trick" by Dubois (2010: 277), allowing the notion of "implementation gap" in public policy management to be nuanced. The concepts of substantial discretion and the implementation trick are useful to highlight "how the action of the state is actually produced, and how the rules of the institutions in charge of it are defined and updated" (Dubois 2015: 53). It may be important to emphasize that this room for maneuver is not to be understood as an arbitrary act, but as one regulated by the legal dispositions governing the public action in question. Furthermore, "the organizational context in which these interactions take place, in particular the frequent lack of resources and time, has important effects on the use of discretionary power" (Achermann 2018: 18).

With the aim of analyzing political uses of the social function of art through sociocultural public action using hip hop in Francophone Belgium, I consider the people working in the above-mentioned organizations who are in regular contact with the people targeted by this public policy to be street-level bureaucrats of the sociocultural public action aimed at young people. For example, Etienne Droussin, as coordinator of the YC Thier-à-Liège and MAS, is responsible for ensuring daily work and regular or punctual projects and actions framed by the most recent four-year plan. He is also responsible for compliance with the legal rules governing not-for-profit organizations in Belgium.

During our semi-structured interview, he explained that it is out of passion and because of an interest in the lyrical approach of rap music that he became interested in hip hop within the framework of his YC coordinator activities. Indeed, as a member of the punk and alternative rock movement in Liège and Belgium: "I thought that the lyrics could complement each other

and I thought [hip hop] was an interesting approach, so I wanted to support the development of the hip hop movement." Speaking of La Zone, a famous cultural institution in Liège, he goes on: "As I came from La Zone, I always had contacts with La Zone, I realized that the hardcore scene, as a hardcore who played at La Zone, the values of that movement were very close to the values of the hip-hop movement" (Droussin 2018: n.p.). Jérémy Piolat, another interviewee, also spoke of the link he perceived between the punk and hip hop movements in terms of social criticism and protest: "I was punk, well post-punk because I was too young to be punk. But I liked that energy, and gradually, I think it was NTM and Public Enemy who made the link to rap [and] movements that were sometimes political, sometimes musical [...] And so, in relation to that, I quickly became aware of rap without denying my artistic origins at all, so to speak" (Piolat 2023: n.p.). In a short piece of documentary realized by the YC Thier-à-Liège in 1992 and focusing on hip hop with FMR (former JNC) and H-Posse, the latter also describe the links between these social and artistic movements: "All the hip hop movement is a culture, like punk, the new wave movement, etc. [...] the hardcore movement with antimilitarism and all of that […] They don't want to play society's game, and neither do we."[197]

In the same video archive, members of H-Posse and FMR provides explanations on how they conceive hip hop and its movement: "Everyone has the right to identify with rap, no matter what nationality you are, you come from the same place, the same *cité*, the same ghetto and you get on just as well with a Belgian as with a Uruguayan, whatever you want, as long as they come from the same place as you." Another interviewee continued:

> The most important thing in rap is to get a message across. So in a way you're only allowed to say what you see and not make things up. For example, I see [police] checks, I see drugs, I see immigration. The best way to sing a rap is if you feel it. […] The most important thing is to create a society between us.[198]

Based on this approach, H-Posse and the YC Thier-à-Liège developed strong links that helped and fostered the development of hip hop in Liège and Wallonia. In a filmed interview realized in 2015 during an exhibition on the beginnings of hip hop in Liège, Etienne Droussin explains that welcoming H-Posse to the YC enabled the latter "to have the whole of Liege's hip hop scene around the group, in particular the JNC graffiti artists, and gradually there were more

[197] See *Thier-à-Liège YC* (1992), "Droit de réponse : interview FMR et H-Posse" (starting from 1: 55).
[198] See *Thier-à-Liège YC* (1992), "Droit de réponse : interview FMR et H-Posse" (starting from 3: 15).

people and even groups from other towns, and that's how the YC became something of a rallying point for the whole of Liege's hip hop scene in the 1990s."[199] The production of *Fidèles au vinyl* crystallized this rallying force behind the emergence and development of hip hop culture in Liège. Therefore, the YC Their-à-Liège appears as "the first logistical base for local rap," and federations like the YCF in Francophone Belgium (see Chapter 11) "were very active in the emergence and development of hip hop in the Francophone community of Belgium" (Lapiower and Van der Hoeven 2018: 328).

Regarding the MAS project, I analyze it in the following section as it still exists today and has been developing since its creation in the late 1990s. Nevertheless, I can emphasize here that the desire of the people who initiated this project, starting with Etienne Droussin, is "to work with young people in the field of new music, because, in their view, it constitutes a new artistic vector integrating complex cultural, sociological, economic and political dimensions. Unfamiliar and therefore rejected, they are sometimes synonymous with subculture and even nuisance" (*Lezarts Urbains* 1999: 156).

Regarding Lezarts Urbains, I mentioned above how it chose to focus on "urban cultures" starting in the early 2000s. Consequently, its new name, chosen in 2004, is a play on words to highlight the focus on these urban arts and cultures. It can be understood in English as "The Urban Arts" while being read as "Urban Lizards." Nowadays, Lezarts Urbains is active in "the associative and cultural network: schools, youth centers, prisons, cultural centers, theaters, libraries and other cultural venues. Lezarts Urbains also manages an information and distribution platform, and maintains a lively Documentation Center."[200] This choice can be thus understood by recalling its willingness to adapt to the realities it encountered on the ground in the 1990s, and the major cultural events that enabled it to see that the practice of hip hop was growing steadily among the first populations targeted by its action. Indeed, the organization's charter states that one of its eight missions is "to develop tools and spaces for the use of these forms and contents ["cultures from working-class backgrounds and urban cultures"] for the purposes of lifelong education, training and civic awareness."[201] Consequently, it is aligned with the goals and methodology of sociocultural action and cultural democracy that this

[199] See *PointCulture* (2015), "Les débuts du Hip Hop liégeois" (starting from 0: 25).

[200] See *Lezarts Urbains* (n. d.), "A propos."

[201] See *Lezarts Urbains* (n. d.), "Charte de l'association."

organization has chosen, to advocate for and use hip hop as a means to fulfill its missions, as Lapiower (2017: n.p.) explained during our interview:

> Here at Lezarts Urbains, we've always defended that, so we've always thought, and I still think, that rap and hip hop, because it's also true of dance, it's true of slam, of all kinds of disciplines, of urban cultures, of hip hop, are tools, strong motives for doing real work on both opening up to artistic expression and all that. But also to work on important socio-pedagogical objectives such as, for example, structuring, greater self-assurance, better personal balance and all that, which we're constantly checking and working on.

This perspective is also reflected in the first paragraph of the Lezarts Urbains' charter: "Concerned by social and cultural inequalities in Brussels, Belgium and abroad, we consider artistic expression to be a privileged means of emancipating individuals and groups, combating racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination, as well as exclusion and social, intellectual and emotional misery."[202] Talking about the role of the organization in the development of these cultures, Lapiower (in Vallet 2012: n.p.) states:

> The first thing we had to do was realize the extent of this movement. That's how the association developed. The ambition was first and foremost to respond to a series of crying needs. Lack of recognition. The lack of material opportunities to exist. So we had to find stages, support artistic projects and inform the public. The purpose of the association was simply to respond to the urgency and pressure from the grassroots. Our missions were defined by force of circumstance [...] These artists wanted to get into the limelight. They didn't want to stay underground. All these artists have a strong link with the street, but they don't want to stay there.

Indeed, he stated in our interview that

> after this first period, when, for example, the YC Thier-à-Liège with Starflam or other YCs in Brussels like the YC [of the municipality of Forest], all helped a lot. There were other periods when other YCs helped out a lot, and released compilations, so for I'd say fifteen years or so, the YCs were really the base for the development of a whole series of rappers [...] so the YCs really played a decisive role until a certain point when rap no longer needed to go through them (Lapiower 2017: n.p.).

These analyses of the role played by field agents in the implementation of sociocultural action policy in Francophone Belgium by using hip hop culture and rap music to meet their objectives thus shed light on the critical role played by these individuals in the examples mentioned. The

[202] See *Lezarts Urbains* (n. d.), "Charte de l'association."

mobilization of the concept of street-level bureaucracy attests to the use of a certain substantial discretion and room for maneuver left to these agents by the regulations. In these examples, the people in charge of implementation decided to choose rap music and hip hop culture as the main instruments for carrying out this public action, out of a certain personal interest in these practices and/or because they felt it was imposed on them by the reality on the ground. As a result, the development of hip hop has been encouraged both within and outside this public policy sector. Nevertheless, in the following subsection, I explain how a certain desire to acquire greater independence from this sector emerged in the 2000s within the movement.

Subsection 2: Using hip hop for sociocultural action aimed at youth: A pathway to legitimation and recognition through institutionalization?

On the issue of how and why public policies would recognize, support, and promote artistic and cultural practices and dynamics outside the formal state and public cultural sectors, the French situation offers an example where hip hop culture is considered as "a tool for self-construction, exchange with others, and identity enhancement for young people in working-class neighbourhoods" (Lafargue de Grangeneuve 2008: 213). This framing allows hip hop to become a resource for public action and help meeting public policy objectives designed, for example, to address social problems attributed to the category of "suburban youth" (Faure and Garcia 2005). Such "political uses of the social function of art" (Lafargue de Grangeneuve 2008: 212; 2006) in France during the 1990s resulted notably in rap music being defined through "the interpretative package of the 'suburban problem', a media framing which makes it a music of the Others, whose otherness is inseparably social and racial. Rap artists inherit this racialized framework and must compose with him in multiple professional interactions" (Hammou and Simon 2018: 30; Hammou 2016).

On the processes of artistic legitimation through institutional logics and dynamics, Faure and Garcia (2005), in their study on hip hop dance in France, shed light on the complexity of the processes of institutionalization and legitimization of artistic practices considered popular in order to analyze the mechanisms that allow for transitions from "popular" to "legitimate." They show how the institutionalization of hip hop dance in France has notably materialized through the "construction of specific socialization frameworks" for hip hop dancers that had the effect of legitimizing an artistic practice that stemmed from so-called popular forms of cultural expression, while reinforcing certain dividing lines between the "popular" and the "cultural"

(Garcia 2015). It appears that the institutionalization of hip hop can generate contradictory reactions among the actors of this culture and put them "in front of a series of inseparably political and aesthetic dilemmas" (Lafargue de Grangeneuve 2006: 468).

Nitzsche (2013), in her introduction to *Hip-Hop in Europe: Cultural identities and transnational flows*, highlights several waves of scholarship in European hip hop studies. One of these waves aims to "show that hip-hop has become a relatively institutionalized field investigating how this phenomenon can be used as an educational means for the young people" (ibid.: 17). For example, Johan Söderman and Ove Sernhede "argue Swedish youth use hip-hop as an expression of social inclusion and as a tool for an alternative education" inspired by pedagogical models articulated around or based on hip hop (ibid.: 368). As explained above, it appears indeed that the pedagogical potential of hip hop has been a matter of hip hop studies from its beginning.

In the case of Francophone Belgium, the empirical analysis so far shows that the Youth and Lifelong Education sectors quickly noted and considered that hip hop represents "codes and styles familiars for young people in which they recognize themselves" and which "converge with their sensibility," constituting some "strong tools and motives" for the development of artistic expression and socio-pedagogical achievements (Lapiower 2017: n.p.). To use it as relevant pedagogical tools familiar to young people, these organizations were the first and the only institutionally recognized and subsidized Belgian ones to have opened their doors to hip hop and to have responded to its arrival and spread in the 1980s. They were the first contact points and places where Belgian hip hop artists could find some support and legalized public stages on which to perform until at least the 2000s, as Magali Company, former YC coordinator and pedagogical advisor at the Youth Centers Federation in Francophone Belgium, explained to me during a semi-structured interview in 2017 (n.p.): "It was clear that hip hop only existed in YCs, and you knew that it wasn't something that was taught in schools, workshops or internships." YCs reacted thus "according to their missions, to welcome young people, all young people and, therefore, also young people from working class backgrounds who all felt challenged by this new movement" (Lapiower 2017: n.p.). This first reading of hip hop by the Youth and Lifelong Education sectors seems then to have legitimized the beginning of public action using it and thus its institutionalization within the sociocultural policy field.

Building on a specific youth cultural policy framework designed for the aim of sociocultural action, historically targeting the fight against social exclusion, and through a reading grid of hip hop as having been appropriated by young Europeans for social motivations, the Youth and Lifelong Education sectors identified the possibilities that hip hop could offer for the implementation of its public interventions. This growing institutionalization has helped to legitimize and recognize hip hop in the Francophone Belgian sociocultural field. Therefore, it seems that such non-for-profit organizations helped to ensure that the forms of counterculture offered by its arts and culture were "instituted where the official institutions closed the doors" (Company 2017: 61). Such dynamics of institutionalization appear then to have helped the creation of interstitial spaces in the cultural field, offering platforms to marginalized voices and racialized minorities to express themselves and find their own place in society to a certain extent. According to Carmelo Mammo, sociocultural animator and specialized educator at the YC Thier-à-Liège, the role of a YC coordinator "is less to think up and organize well-crafted projects (although it is also necessary to do so) than, more fundamentally, to allow spaces, interstices where young people can grasp the meaning of what they come to experience" (Mammo and Debras 2008: 82).

Such an approach would translate "a highly politicized conception of culture, strongly influenced by the sociological literature on 'socio-cultural handicap' or on the participation of culture in processes of domination" (Genard 2014: 2). According to this approach, presupposing the existence of recognized cultural models would participate in processes of social domination. However, as the Youth Sector claims, "looking at cultural practices solely through the prism of the fight against social exclusion was too simplistic" compared to daily experiences in associations and organizations. While the actors of the sector do not question the favorable effect of cultural practices on vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, they do not want to reduce culture to this sole function of repair and inclusion. According to them, "this would be an unacceptable withdrawal from the ambitions of sociocultural action" (Youth Department of the Federation Wallonia-Brussels 2013: 9.).

In relation to this and while remembering the certain balance between participatory ideology and social marketing that influences the daily work of YCs since the 1990s (see Chapter 7), I can begin to analyze an evolution in the positioning of the hip hop movement and rap artists in relation to their integration into the sociocultural field for youth cultural policy in Francophone Belgium. In the early 2000s, mostly because of "frustrations" and/or "misunderstandings"

between some representatives of these structures and some hip hop artists involved in their projects, a kind of feeling of "bitter assessment" was fostered among a lot of artists of the first hip hop generation in Belgium. In some ways, hip hop in Francophone Belgium "remained for a long time stuck in these Youth Centers" while "hip hop artists and organizers and all that aspired to much more, more level of work [...] they wanted to go to the big stages" (Lapiower 2017: n.p.). Artists aspired to greater professionalization when the sector was asking them to perform their arts because they wanted to be considered as artists and not only as young people from working-class or underprivileged areas wishing to denounce practices and situations of social exclusion.

If YCs were the first places to welcome hip hop arts and culture, after a decade of public sociocultural projects using hip hop, the hip hop artists' own aspirations and goals were not necessarily always fitting the frame and duties of the sociocultural action that was legitimizing the mobilization of their arts in this public policy field: "hip hoppers were looking for more than vacation workshops and a support that they considered too rudimentary for candidates to main stages and large professional studios" (Lapiower 2017: 41). More generally, "hip hoppers of all disciplines had a deep and explicit desire to 'get out of the ghetto' and take 'downtown' by storm" (Lapiower 2018: 328).

These developments allow us to return to the concept of cultural democracy and its link with the use of hip hop for cultural public action in Francophone Belgium. Indeed, as presented in Chapter 7, the main challenges and objectives of the concept of cultural democracy are to open the meaning of culture, foster an institutional recognition of cultural and artistic practices that have little or no recognition in the public cultural sphere, and promote access to cultural creation and consumption to anyone. Regarding disadvantaged young urban populations, it is about fostering recognition and the development of their abilities and talents as critical and creative individuals. David Téti, coordinator of the Youth Department of the city of Herstal (in the urban area of Liège), mentioned in a semi-structured interview the importance of cultural democracy in his work with young hip hop artists in Herstal. I then asked him about his vision of cultural democracy and how he implements it in his daily work:

> [T]he way to get young people involved is to get in touch with them, by going out and finding them where they are. And these are young people who aren't necessarily used to going through the doors of institutions. But now they do. When the link is there, when trust is established, it's easier, they feel safer, more at ease. The idea behind this cultural democracy is to rid ourselves

> of our own judgments, our own prejudices, our own morals. To try to let go, to open up to something that's going to be created. To something we're in the process of creating, which may well make us feel good, in terms of values, respect, a whole series of strong human values, and at the same time, it may also require us to look at the arts with a neutral eye. Neutral, not in the indifferent sense, but neutral in the sense of not necessarily comparing them (Téti 2021: n.p.).

Making the connection with hip hop, he continues:

> Is it perhaps the fact that hip hop was so marginalized in Herstal for a whole period and scorned by institutions and also cultural institutions? Maybe it's because there are still castes in the arts. I love opera, and so does my five-year-old son, who's a big fan of *Le nozze di Figaro*. He listens to it over and over again, and it's great, but it's not necessarily better or worse than a composition by MCO, a rapper from Herstal who, in terms of energy, artistry, creativity and strength, has exactly the same value.

The challenge posed by the concept of cultural democracy can thus be summed up by the question of "how to practice a culture that is not discriminatory," meaning one that rejects any hierarchization of cultural forms and practices, and promotes the recognition of those who have historically been considered minor or not legitimate enough to have a voice in the Francophone Belgian public sphere. The aim is thus to encourage people to define culture themselves, rather than defining it as something imposed by public institutions. In Belgium, a socialist politician and writer called Marcel Hicter[203] played a decisive role in the development of cultural and educational policies for young people. A precursor of some of the ambitions of the May 68 movement, he believed that education leads to democracy and that youth organizations or those working directly with young people should be encouraged and subsidized by the public authorities, while allowing them maximum autonomy.[204] His well-known words sum up what lifelong education is about in the framework of cultural democracy:

> My option is therefore: neither culture for all, nor culture for everyone, but culture by everyone and with everyone, with a view to the development of all. [...] There is no culture external to human, no cultural matter to which the people must have access, which must be brought to the people, which can be counterplated [...] it is a question of challenging the patrimonial notion of culture to replace it with the definition of culture by the people themselves (Hicter, in Nossent 2009: 2).

[203]At the end of World War II, he was appointed advisor in charge of the creation of the National Youth Service (1946-1954), which was attached to the cabinet of the Minister of Public Instruction. He was also a founding member of the World Assembly of Youth. His life was dedicated to "the establishment of a system of democratic, lifelong and in-depth education for young people" (Broché 2016: 24).

[204] See *La Marlagne Cultural Center* (2019), "Marcel Hicter."

The concept of "urban cultures" in Francophone Belgium has been associated with that of sociocultural action, as illustrated by the example of the Lezarts Urbains, which is currently the most important not-for-profit organization using hip hop on a daily basis for its action. In its charter, Lezarts Urbains defines the concept of urban cultures: "By urban cultures, we mean the cultures that have emerged over the last 40 years in working-class neighborhoods and areas of relegation, such as hip-hop culture, urban dance, slam poetry and other related trends."[205] The organization considers hip hop culture as "one of the central branches of urban cultures" (*Lezarts Urbains* 2000: 107). This definition is to be put into perspective with the primary ambition of sociocultural action, which is to combat exclusion and social inequalities, including obviously those arising from racism. Nevertheless, when I interviewed Lapiower (2017: n.p.) a little over ten years after the writing of this charter, he explained that the concept of urban culture "is really a fuzzy thing par excellence," adding:

> If only for one thing, a detail, because I always say that, I say that hip hop originally defined something quite precise, it was a culture, there was rap, there was b-boying, so dance, you had graffiti, deejaying, plus there was what we called the fifth discipline, so that's the spirit, the *hip hop mind* (in English in the original talk), that's it. But when you've got all these new things coming up, which are so different […] can we still call it hip hop? In fact, the name hip hop isn't really used by young people anymore. For some young people, hip hop just means, for example, in music, as soon as you have a big sound with big bass, well that's hip hop.

Although their link with the emergence of hip hop is well established, the term "urban cultures" seems to be rather vague, making it difficult to fully grasp what it is all about. This raises the question of whether the use of this term contributes to a better recognition of hip hop's elements as cultural and artistic practices in their own right, which should have as much right to exist in the public space as any other cultural and artistic practices, as called for by the concept of cultural democracy.

[205] See *Lezarts Urbains* (n. d.), "Charte de l'association."

Chapter 10

Trying to professionalize Belgian rap music while avoiding instrumentalization in the early 2000s

This chapter continues the previous discussion regarding the institutionalization of hip hop within the framework of sociocultural action in Francophone Belgium, as well as the ongoing development of the Francophone Belgian rap music art world in the early 2000s.

Section 1

Rejecting categorization and avoiding instrumentalization despite stereotypes and amalgams

In 1999 and 2000, two major debates held at the Cultural Center Jacques Franck in the Brussels municipality of Saint-Gilles about the "artistic development of hip hop culture" and "its relationship with the institutional" in Francophone Belgium. Or, in other words, the question of "the change experienced by hip hop culture, its transition from a relatively closed, underground state of activism to greater openness to the general public, institutions and the uninitiated" (Panther, in *Lezarts Urbains* 2000: 127).

The 1999 debate took place during the Hip Hop Spring festival and "spontaneously focused on the desirable insertion, or otherwise, [of hip hop culture] into cultural centers." The 2000 debate was held during the International Festival of Urban Cultures and "sharply questioned the policy of the [Federation Wallonia-Brussels] on 'popular cultures' and 'new artistic realities' that break down old structures or molds." Both debates brought together local and regional political and administrative leaders from ministerial cabinets and the relevant administrative departments (e.g., Ministry of Culture and General Administrative Department for Culture, Saint-Gilles Cultural Department, Louvain-la-Neuve[206] Youth Coordination Service), leaders and workers from not-for-profit organizations (e.g., Lezarts Urbains, CBAI),[207] as well as organizations from the hip hop movement such as Afrokore, Souterrain Production, or the UZN Belgian Chapter. These debates were transcribed in one of the issues of the magazine *Rue des*

[206] Louvain-la-Neuve is a city close to Brussels.

[207] The CBAI (Brussels Center for Intercultural Action/ Centre Bruxellois d'Action Interculturelle) "is an association founded in 1981 out of the experience of migration and exile, and a 'civic passion' for a city-region, Brussels, that has become multicultural" (see *CBAI* (n. d.), "Qui sommes-nous ?"). It is one of the most active Brussels not-for-profit organizations in its field.

Usines, published by Lezarts Urbains in 2000. As Richard Kalisz, former director of Lezarts Urbains, explains when introducing the transcripts: "These two acts, part of a real dynamic, seem to us to be highly significant. Perhaps they mark a milestone in the history of cultural dialogue. Face to face, difficult communication. Obviously difficult... but not impossible" (*Lezarts Urbains* 2000: 107).

Panther, representing the Afrokore organization, was present at both discussions and shared his analysis of the issues at stake based on the experience of his association. Explaining a negative experience he had with the Cultural Center Chiroux in the city of Liège about planning a hip hop program for a contemporary dance festival, he returned to the subject of how cultural centers were welcoming hip hop when organizing large-scale events such as festivals:

> In their heads, there's this idea that hip hop, coming from the street, is necessarily something that must cost less than contemporary dance. Secondly, what really gets me about the way institutional people look at hip hop is that it's a purely social thing; they think: these are young people from working-class neighborhoods; it's culture or informal education. So there's no need to put a price on it.

He continues:

> People refuse to see hip hop as purely artistic creation. For me, that's the heart of the problem, it's the way the media look at it. Even in the newspapers, you can find 'a rapper, a young guy from the suburbs...', etc... We'll never say of a rapper that he's a guy who has reconfigured the French language, who has resituated syntax, who has a new language and who has really worked on a text. No, they'll say 'he's a young guy from the suburbs who's made it'. Even people who appear on television, like [the French rapper] Akhenaton, for example, are hardly considered artists.

He concludes:

> Let's stop believing that people in the suburbs don't create, that people in working-class neighborhoods don't create, that because you're black or Arab, you don't create, that you only create when you've been to the Conservatoire, when you've been to art school, when you've had certain budgets to create and a studio to create in. People should stop believing that (in *Lezarts Urbains* 2000: 113).

The aim of this intervention is therefore to highlight the lack of recognition of hip hop's disciplines as artistic disciplines, compared with other disciplines integrated into

institutionalized cultural spheres. According to the speaker, this phenomenon can be explained by a classist and racializing reading of the hip hop practice in Francophone Belgium, with the result that even the best-known hip hop practitioners are not really considered artists in the full sense of the term. This interpretation can be read in conjunction with Hammou's analysis of the racialized framework in which rap music artists in France have to evolve.

Arabee, a member of Souterrain Production, then shared his views about the concrete procedures related to institutional recognition by the sociocultural and cultural sectors:

> It's not that we don't want to submit an application, but I don't really like the expression 'if it's serious', we are what we are and I don't understand why we have to bend over backwards to please a political power or an institution, saying that we have to meet certain criteria to get a subsidy. I am who I am, and I want people to respect me, to appreciate my culture and the arts I develop (in *Lezarts Urbains* 2000: 115).

This perspective can be read in parallel with that developed by the label 9mm Recordz, which has always refused to make artistic concessions for sociocultural objectives established by the competent public action sectors. During the 2000 debate, Dema, another member of Souterrain Production, shared the general positioning of their organization in relation to these issues: "I'm here today for a debate between institutions and hip hop movements. Let me be clear. I want to see what they propose so that I can respond. If they don't come up with anything, us, we'll calmly continue in self-governance" (ibid.: 130). Lady N (Noémi Hébette), a rapper and visual artist active since 1995 and a member of Souterrain Production (*Espace Magh* 2023), also shared her opinion:

> I have no desire whatsoever for the hip hop movement to be taken over by the state, because as soon as there are organized parties, we won't be able to go inside in tracksuit-sneakers. You'll look like an Arab: you won't be able to get in. You'll be black: you won't be able to get in... even though they're the ones who created the movement in the first place... When it comes to fashion, it's a state of mind that makes hip hop what it is, and certainly not clothes, because most of the people behind the movement don't have any money, and most of the time, it's what's called the 'loan' that dresses us (in *Lezarts Urbains* 2000: 115–116).

In March 2022, I attended the first day of a festival dedicated to the history of hip hop culture in Francophone Belgium at the Cultural Center Espace Magh in the heart of Brussels.[208] This

[208] The center is "dedicated to promoting the cultures of the Mediterranean basin. Its specificity is to pay particular attention to so-called minority cultures, to listen to artists from immigrant backgrounds, who are all too often

day was a tribute in the form of a panel discussion with musical interludes about "the careers, experiences and historical anecdotes of various emblematic figures in Belgian hip-hop, in the presence of the artists" (Espace Magh 2022). Lady N was part of the panel and returned to the question of the recognition of hip hop during the 2000s. She explained that it was difficult in those years to gain recognition for hip hop as an artistic discipline. Indeed, the artistic character of hip hop was not really recognized outside the meeting of public policy objectives with a social scope, but artists did not want to be confined to this single categorization and function. She also mentioned the difficulty of gaining access to media spaces and broadcasting vectors for the general public, such as radio and television, which were the essential means of promotion and artistic visibility in the music field at the time.

During the 2021 radio program about the origins of Belgian hip hop mentioned above, DJ Rokia Bamba also highlighted that in the 1990s and early 2000s, it was very difficult to have a radio show concept that would be based primarily on hip hop culture and black music. Rap artists had no real access to the few existing radio stations in Francophone Belgium:

> In Belgium [...] hip hop was a [musical] genre that was really frightening at the time. Even in terms of radio, the tracks, whether self-produced or even accessible like those of Benny B or BRC, I don't think BRC was on the national [radio] channels [...] But on Radio Campus, I would say it came on much later because the first hip hop show [*laughs*] actually appeared with me and we started in '97.

In the 1990s, Rokia Bamba co-created a radio show called *Full Mix* on Radio Campus, the community radio station of the Free University of Brussels (ULB), created in 1980 (see below). She continues: "But at the time, free radio stations were still afraid of this musical genre and especially of who was performing it. They were afraid of what might happen if they were in the studio [...] I would say it was stereotypes and amalgams, because they didn't know about it."[209] The same kind of fears were common among bookers/tour managers and concert organizers.

When speaking of the creation of her radio show linked to the question of the presence of women in the hip hop movement, she recalls the difficulties in getting her radio show on air:

overlooked, and, finally, to act as an echo chamber for a certain number of authors from the South or elsewhere, who are as surprising as they are ignored, and who have not found asylum elsewhere" (Espace Magh (n. d.)).

[209] See *Radio Campus* (2021), "Aux origines du hip-hop belge / Miam des Médias" (starting from 25:45).

> We had to fight to get a show on Radio Campus because we were women and because we played music that was badly perceived. So it took us two years to convince the Radio Campus [Works Council], and we were in tears. [Hip hop] is part of our musical culture and we had the impression that the role of radio was precisely to be a conduit [...] and we felt we weren't being taken seriously because we were playing hip hop.

They adapted their strategy to deal with this situation: "And so we transformed our CV [*laughs*], our request for a show by saying: 'Listen, we're going to play Aretha Franklin, don't worry' and then little by little we brought in the rappers and so on. And there's never been any breakage or theft whatsoever."[210] Rokia Bamba explains also how the phenomena of racialization and certain stereotypes and amalgams shed light on the understanding of such a situation of cultural ostracization of hip hop on Francophone Belgian radio stations:

> You always have to look at the history of immigration behind it. It's simply that, it's the other that frightens you. When you don't know the other, it arouses fears and then amalgams are very quickly associated and labels are very quickly applied […] I would say that it's really linked to the history of immigration, it's really that, it's the stereotypes that make it a scary genre.[211]

Such a situation may appear surprising coming from a radio station such as Radio Campus, which is historically linked to the Brussels cultural associative sector, and which emerged as a free radio station, i.e., to claim greater freedom of expression and a certain independence from the private sector and state institutions. There was a real barrier to the dissemination of hip hop on Francophone Belgian radio stations, whereas in France, free and alternative radio stations played a decisive role in the emergence of the movement even though it had the same stereotypical image as in Francophone Belgium:

> [At the time] there's a barrier to broadcasting this kind of music, and the barrier is the radio stations that do it, that have done it for a very long time […] It was a very, very difficult time for them, they weren't audible, they were invisible, but they remained visible to those for whom they really wanted to play, that is, their public.[212]

Drawing a parallel with the generation of hip hop artists of the 2010s, who came to the notice of the general public around 2015, Rokia Bamba highlights:

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[210] See *Radio Campus* (2021), "Aux origines du hip-hop belge / Miam des Médias" (starting from 30:25).
[211] See *Radio Campus* (2021), "Aux origines du hip-hop belge / Miam des Médias" (starting from 28:10).
[212] See *Radio Campus* (2021), "Aux origines du hip-hop belge / Miam des Médias" (starting from 31:50).

> At the time, I would say that there was this thing of thinking: 'I'm releasing a record, it absolutely has to be released on a major label so that it's visible, so that it's audible', but there was so much rejection that subsequent generations understood and said: 'We're all going to self-produce and we're going to release [the songs] via our own network.'[213]

Speaking more generally about the recognition of hip hop by the institutional sphere during the 2000 debate, R. Kalisz compared the state subsidies between the "Festival de Liège"[214] and the International Festival for Urban Cultures in which the debate was held. He noted that two million Belgian francs (approximately €50,000 euros without taking inflation into account) were released by the Federation Wallonia-Brussels for the latter, while the Festival de Liège benefited from a subsidy of between 15 and 40 million Belgian francs (approximately between €370,000 and €1,000,000 without taking inflation into account). He went on:

> It needs to see the difference! I'm not saying we should pretend to the same thing, but there's a singular scale of values here. There's always the noble arts, and then there's the poor relation! Recognition is therefore extremely low, the means derisory and the opening very narrow. We have to fight for hip hop to be considered an artistic movement in its own right. Of course, we have to ensure that it has a social dimension and doesn't lose that soul. Some products are losing that link, but in Belgium, for the most part, we're not there yet. We're still trying to get proper recognition (in *Lezarts Urbains* 2000: 135).

Lady N then gave her thoughts on the issue:

> We're only prepared to do something for hip hop and urban cultures if we fit into a little box, if we adapt to your selection criteria, your choices, your desires, but hip hop is precisely the opposite of all that. It is about claiming! I don't want to be put in a shoebox and told: 'you're like this and like that' (ibid.).

Jean-Pierre Nossent, Deputy General Director at the General Administration of Culture in Francophone Belgium at the time, also shared his opinion about the previous developments:

> I agree with Richard [Kalisz] and the analyses that have just been made [...] Quite positive discourses of intent recognize popular culture, not in the sense that it would be something of the past, but that it is made now, by minority groups. It's the valorization of cultures as contestation of the dominant culture. And here, despite the positive rhetoric, there's no valid system worthy

[213] See *Radio Campus* (2021), "Aux origines du hip-hop belge / Miam des Médias" (starting from 36:05).

[214] Previously known as the *Rencontres d'Octobre*, since 2001 the Liège Festival has been an international program of meetings and artistic shows, lasting around three weeks, focusing on performing arts, mainly theater, dance and music (Festival de Liège (n. d.)).

> of the name, and it's true that, for the moment, we're locking people into little boxes and categories. Is it worth losing one's soul, in quotation marks, for some help from the ministries, that's the question you're asking (ibid.).

Marc Bertholomé, Deputy Chief of Cabinet to the Minister for Youth and Lifelong Education at the time, admitted previously in the debate "a discrepancy between what was conceived at a certain point in time, the way the administration operated, and what is the reality on the ground today." He went on to explain: "It's true that in the way we've traditionally conceived cultural policy over the last thirty years or so, we've allowed two branches to become autonomous, one more focused on artistic creation linked to professional practices and the other more focused on lifelong education and popular culture." Returning to the origins of the lifelong education approach, which was linked to popular culture and the workers movement in the 1970s, he explains that it was a political movement in the sense that the political and administrative authorities responsible for formulating this public policy "actually had a social project in mind, which produced political organization and organized social movement." Drawing a link with the state of the hip hop movement in Francophone Belgium in the early 2000s, he explains:

> I have the same questions about [...] the social and the artistic. If we want to articulate a social approach to hip hop as an artistic creation, aren't we in the process of instrumentalizing an artistic movement? And if so, what is its revolutionary capacity – to put it in quotation marks – revolutionary in the sense of creation? (ibid.: 131).

He gave then final thoughts about a last point related to the consideration of hip hop by sociocultural and cultural policies in Francophone Belgium:

> I also wonder about hip hop in terms of an artistic trend. There is, in fact, a very rapid transition [...] to what is now called mass culture. Very strangely, in our cultural policies, in what is organized by governments and what exists in administrations, mass culture is, in fact, an unthought-of issue. It's easy to see where popular culture fits in: it's traditionally on the side of Lifelong Education. It's easy to see where elitist culture fits in, which can also be described as bourgeois or classical, but it's more complicated for mass culture. It's a more recent phenomenon, at least in relation to legislation introduced twenty or thirty years ago. Mass culture is linked to the market phenomenon. Quite normally, public authorities have not seen fit to find ways of supporting mass culture, because it finds its own economy. Popular culture, on the other hand, needs support, as does elitist culture, but for different reasons (ibid.).

At the end of the 2000 debate, Alain Lapiower reviewed the work carried out by the Fondation Jacques Gueux (Lezarts Urbains) since the early 1990s. He explained that the first period

consisted of “a mediation work,” “making a series of institutional circuits aware that there was a new culture.” These were the first festivals, and at the time, it was simply a matter of saying: “hip hop exists”. He went on to say

> the stakes have changed: the idea was to work with associations that came from hip hop, Souterrain and Zulu Nation in particular. There are others now. We wanted to work together to build events, but it was, once again, a job of mediation [...] [The International Festival of Urban Cultures] of yesterday showed that we’re now in a new situation and that the era of mediation is coming to an end.

Anticipating the coming orientation accuracy of the Fondation Jacques Gueux, which would become four years later “Lezarts Urbains,” he concluded: “Now our work will change. We’re going to be working more, I think, on artistic issues. As a cultural association [i.e., not sociocultural], we’re more motivated to work on artistic quality and to work together with artists in a more sophisticated way, to build things that are more artistic” (ibid.: 138–139).

These discussions about the beginning of the institutionalization of hip hop confirm the political will to use it in an approach and for objectives defined as sociocultural. Indeed, the sociocultural sector (youth and lifelong education) saw in hip hop an important opportunity to work on the three central axes that underpin its action: the social, the political, and the artistic. While this political will has enabled hip hop to develop and to be recognized as an existing culture to a certain extent, it has not allowed the development of its full potential in terms of artistic professionalization, despite this being the main objective of most of the artists involved in the movement. Some of them then decided to focus on achieving this objective by relying on self-management, links with the professional sector of the music industry and/or with actors in the institutionalized cultural sector whose approach was also one of artistic professionalization. In other words, to challenge the place assigned to hip hop in Francophone Belgium, which had very little space in the audiovisual and media landscape, artists decided to move towards greater self-production and independence from existing structures, a dynamic that crystallized with the generations after 2010 (see below) and was helped enormously by the democratization of digital communication technologies. This transition, albeit a slow one, was thus inaugurated in the Francophone Belgian rap music art world in the early 2000s.

Section 2

Combining the practice of a rap music perceived as authentic with a desire for professionalization: "Socially conscious" Francophone Belgian rap music, commodification, and the limits of the Belgian music market

During the 1999 debate analyzed above, Alain Hutchinson, alderman of culture in the municipality of Saint-Gilles, gave thoughts about the "commercial recuperation" risk:

> Be aware, you leaders of the movement, and there are a few of you in the room: don't distance yourselves from political concerns in the noble sense of the word, we're threatened in this city today by terrible movements, notably from the extreme right, and I can tell you that when you have the fascists in power, which is likely to happen one day, you won't be doing break dancing anymore, you won't be doing anything, and neither will we, in terms of culture. A trivializing culture will be imposed on us. So you must continue to lead this protest, but with the responsibilities that are yours as young people, as leaders of this movement (in *Lezarts Urbains* 2000: 118).

This reflection allows me to introduce the analysis of the positioning of certain leaders of the hip hop movement, such as Starflam, CNN199, Pitcho, and James Deano, in relation to questions of racism in the context of the time, as well as an analysis of the state of the art world of Francophone Belgian rap music. In 2001, Starflam released their second album. Entitled *Survivant* [*Survivor*], it was published by the British major EMI (now majority-owned by Sony) and sold over 60,000 copies, earning a platinum disc in Belgium: "The first time this had happened since Benny B, earning the group a new leading status and lasting success" (Schmitz 2017: n.p.). More than ten years after Benny B, a Francophone Belgian rap group was back on the road to commercial success. In the context of celebrating the album's 20th anniversary, the rappers Akro and Kaer gave an interview to the RTBF via Tarmac, a media dedicated to "urban cultures" (see below). Kaer explains: "There are albums that mark generations, there are albums for which we feel pride. *Survivant* is part of our history, the history of music in Belgium" (in *Tarmac* 2021: n.p.).

The song "*Amnésie internationale*" ["International Amnesia"] was one of the album's promotional singles. Its title is a play on words in relation to the organization Amnesty International, which promotes human rights. The song deals with global human rights issues from a geopolitical perspective; it is about denouncing certain realities of the globalized world as known at the dawn of the 2000s. The following lyrics are from the opening verse by Akro: "*We're back to the Aryans, and is that an asset? […]/ Your actions are like praying to the*

storm/ It doesn't bring back a kid taken hostage by hunger/ In the villages, amnesia circulates like Ebola/ From the West with consulate approval/ Blush, put a candle in your window/ And your guilt will disappear." He evokes a series of global issues of the time, some of which remaining highly topical today: the persistence of Nazi ideology in Europe, world hunger and food security issues, the occurrence of epidemics and an interpretation of this phenomenon as resulting from some kind of secret plan put in place by political elites, and the outbreak of new wars around the globe. The reference to "the candle in the window" is linked to an annual awareness-raising campaign by Amnesty International to promote respect for human rights by selling candles bearing the organization's logo. Akro points to a recurring criticism of this type of initiative, when implemented by major international humanitarian NGOs, namely that those taking part feel they are having a significant impact on the cause in question, when in fact the impact is much less.

Baloji raps the second verse of the song and denounces the same kinds of global issues as Akro. He evokes, for example, the analysis of responsibility for the occurrence of crimes against humanity, suggesting that the main culprits are not necessarily acting alone, but are being used to serve the interests of other players such as large multinationals. In the third and final verse, Seg raps: "*Every scene of violence on a childhood doomed to death/ More than opening debates, let's disarm combat/ So that human reason prevails over reasons of state/ I'm here to refresh the collective memory […] 50 candles, half a century of amnesia, the Nazi soul is not dead/ History is repeating itself on our doorstep*." Evoking the notion of collective memory and reminding that the Nazi ideology lives on, the rapper acts as a kind of alarm bell on the resurgence of movements close to the spectra of such ideology. It is sadly remarkable that, more than 20 years later, these lyrics ring true given the rise of these movements in the West and beyond.

The concept of the music video places the rappers in the home of a family that is presented as bourgeois and quite wealthy. For the video clip, this family represents the typical image of Belgium's haute bourgeoisie. Each rapper performs his verse in a room of the house alongside a family member (either mother, father, son, or daughter) who does not seem to see him, as if the rappers were ghosts whispering their lyrics in these people's ears. During the choruses, the video's color palette, which is neutral during the verses, changes to a dominant shade of red, to underline the song's message about the state of the world in terms of violence committed against the most vulnerable populations, as well as the artists' anger about it. Marie Daulne,

founder of the women's group Zap Mama in 1991, and Sabine Kabongo, former member of the group,[215] sing the chorus while Daulne appears performing it in the video. At the end of the clip, dollar bills are thrown in the father's face as he sits at a dining table drinking a glass of wine, while the mother is particularly happy to see more dollar bills flying around the room where she is.

At the end of the video, a sample of a voice with a pronounced Belgian accent (probably from Liège) is inserted to say: "You don't owe anything but you paid anyway, you know, to please all those people, to make those sons of bitches' wallets turn, you know? To show that, yeah, justice is here, we're here [too], don't worry." This excerpt seems to attest to the artists' point of view on the functioning of justice in modern states, a functioning that would be motivated by the desire to make money to feed the political-judicial system and its actors, portrayed as "sons of bitches." The last sentence of the extract sounds like a warning to these people, through an opposition of "us" against "them," with "us" representing "the street" in the hip hop imaginary, i.e., the people, against the political elites.

The song "*Amnésie internationale*" appears as a kind of synthesis of the general artistic approach of Francophone Belgian rap at the time in terms of writing and themes. The world situation is portrayed as highly unequal, with populations falling victim to interests that go beyond them, with the sole aim of enriching certain groups of people. As the song's title suggests, there is also a certain desire to recall history to invigorate a "collective memory" that should result in the rejection of profoundly unequal ideologies such as those akin to racism. As DJ Mig-One's scratches say at the end of the song, according to Starflam, "it's always the people who suffer from it." This is further evidence of the politicization of Francophone Belgian rap at the time, which was generally conscious of global issues relating to the respect and promotion of human rights, with artists not hesitating to give their opinion by denouncing abuses and hypocrisies in these areas.

In another song, "*De Frente (El Diablo II)*" ["Straight Ahead (The Devil II)"], Kaer raps the following lyrics in Spanish: "*Africa and South America are still prisoners/ Slaves of Europe,*

[215] Zap Mama is a Belgian female vocal group renowned for their unique blend of African polyphony, Afro-reggae rhythms and contemporary sounds. Their music, often labeled and marketed as "world pop" or "world music," has generated an international fan base, largely due to their vibrant stage performances and strong vocal abilities. Zap Mama have also collaborated with many artists (*Wikipedia* 2024).

Japan and the old ones/ Degenerates running the world/ Squeezing the juice out of the third world/ Interest, selfishness, hypocrisy/ Big narcos are from the C.I.A./ Making the law without faith or style/ Killing Che, releasing Pinochet." These lyrics denounce certain events or make certain accusations in relation to world geopolitics and the evolution of the globalized capitalist economy since the end of World War II. Baloji raps the last verse and denounces certain consequences of colonization on the colonized populations: "*Let them pray to that blond Jesus who leaves Africa bankrupt/ That's why my father's dream is my Afropean nightmare*." He refers specifically to the controversy surrounding the dominant Western representation of the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth, who, although born in Bethlehem (Palestine) to a mother from the same regional group, is often portrayed as a white man with blond hair and blue eyes. Baloji goes on to explain that the dream of his father of leaving Congo, a state considered by many to be bankrupt, for Belgium, and thus hoping to offer his family a better life, represented a nightmare for Baloji. He mobilizes then the concept of "Afropean" identity to share his own situation as the son of a Congolese immigrant living in Belgium.

Indeed, one of the specificities of the term Afropean comes from its ability to "make visible a kaleidoscopic Europe freed from the essentialist definition where the basic conceptual structure is often binary" (de Fátima Outeirinho 2017: 3). It is a matter of "making visible transnational and transcultural realities in today's Europe" (ibid.: 5) while avoiding referring to skin color. As Léonora Miano (2020: 180), one of the most prolific authors of Afropean literature, highlights in *Afropea: Utopie post-occidentale et post-raciste*: "Having made the choice to unite in it two spaces and their memories, [the Afropean approach] cannot subscribe to any essentialist Manichaeism." In this perspective, when Afropeanity is placed on "the terrain of poetic creation," the posture becomes that of a "collective experience" that can be "an engine of culture" (Laurent 2011: 26). This approach is endorsed by L. Miano, who rejects any essentialist perspective when addressing notions such as identities, diasporas, or the African continent. The "arborescences" of the African continent and its various regions are central to Miano's work, particularly those that have been brought across the Atlantic. From then on, her work gives a decisive place to the "great figures of American black nationalism," or to the "contemporary (black) stars of the American cultural scene," while highlighting "the legendary strength of uprooted Africans such as Kunta Kinté," so that this work belongs to a "novel literary third space," aiming to be free from the specter of essentialization (Laurent 2011: 27). Such a perspective helps us to understand the analysis of Baloji regarding his own situation in Belgium as a person of sub-Saharan descent. He denounces the unfavorable situation of

minority groups with an immigrant background, and the illusions that some of them may have entertained about a European El Dorado that would in reality be quite the opposite, more akin to a life in hell, hence the reference to "El Diablo."

In the same perspective, Baloji raps the following lyrics on the track "*Le vice*" ["The Vice"]: "*The state mafia, the dirty myth, the dirty killjoy/ But you know what I feel like, pissing on the chosen ones/ Of this God who turns a blind eye to the misery of his children/ From Palestine, Panama or Kivu/ Or even closer to your home*." The track "*Choisis ton camp*" ["Choose Your Side"] features the Brussels rapper and singer Uman, member of De Puta Madre, who raps the following: "*400 years of slavery, you think it ends there/ The strongest chains are the ones we can't see/ The most sordid dependencies, the ones we can't feel/ Tell them: it won't take, tell them: we don't want/ They won't mother us, they won't tame us*." In the same vein as the messages shared above, Uman refers to the period of slavery and calls for resistance against the will to oppress populations, even when it is intended to be subtle. The album's last song is "*Péril urbain*" ["Urban Peril"] and focuses on the life expectations of a generation of rap artists in Belgium, and more specifically in Liège. Baloji raps the last verse of the song, beginning with: "*Feel the tenor of the pauper's rap/ Criticizing the leaders […]/ My response to the police state/ Is self-management, self-defense and autonomy*."

The approach mobilized in writing these lyrics is similar to that of previous analyses and refers to the same major themes while Baloji is claiming to make "protest rap." He talks about the right to vote, and explains that even though he does not have it (probably due to his administrative situation in Belgium in relation to the regulations governing access to the right to vote for immigrant populations at the time), he intends to give his opinion and taking part in public debate on the issues that interest him through the practice of rap music. For example, on immigration in Belgium, the rapper formulates a "slogan" developed from contextual elements specific to this theme in Belgium. Firstly, he declares that he wants people without legal residence permits in Belgium to be able to reside in "Laeken," in reference to the Castle of Laeken, an estate in the municipality of Laeken in Brussels, where the Belgian royal family officially resides. Then he calls for "Fabiola," a former "queen of the Belgians,"[216] to be housed in "Vottem," in reference to the presence of a closed center in this village in Liège, a presence

[216] In Belgium, the Constitution states that the sovereign does not reign over a specific territory, but over a specific population, that of "the Belgians."

regularly contested by various militant actions since the opening of this place. Although Fabiola was no longer Queen of the Belgians at the time of the song's release, Baloji's choice to mention her can perhaps be understood by recalling that she was the wife of King Baudouin, the king who was forced to accept the independence of Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi in the early 1960s. Baloji goes on to say that he is against the "system," before evoking various forms of drugs in contemporary society and making a link with the city of Liège, dubbed "Tox City" since at least the 1990s due to the concentration and visibility of certain heroin- and cocaine-type drugs and their users in Liège's public space.[217] This link is made through a reference to a song by Jacques Brel entitled "It Snows on Liège," with the snow being a metaphor for heroin and cocaine.

While *Survivant* is certainly the Belgian rap project that most marked the early 2000s, it is not the only one to have gone down in the history of Belgian rap. In 2003, the crew CNN199 released their classic eponymous album, supported by the single "*Comme on est venu*" ["As We Came"] and its music video. Since their debut in 1995 and the creation of the independent music label and event organization Souterrain Production, CNN199 established themselves as key players in Belgian hip hop in the early 2000s. In 2005, a two-week exhibition at Le Botanique, one of the best known concert halls and cultural centers in Brussels and Belgium, celebrated ten years of the CNN199 crew, looking back on their contribution "to opening doors that are sometimes closed to urban culture and its creative energy" while focusing on "all the artistic aspects linked to this culture" (*Le Botanique* 2005: n.p.).

In the song "*Assis dans un coffee*" ["Seated in a Coffee Shop"], Djam le Rif, rapper and graffiti/street art artist in CNN199, explains: "*We externalize nothing but our lives*." Later in the song, Rival asserts: "*Sorry I can't write anything else but what I didn't like/ The crew is in place if this flat country considers us one of its folds*." Using a topographical nickname given to Belgium, the flat country, Rival explains that he writes to relate what he does not like, before saying that he defers to his crew when he notices that Belgium considers him to be too much or out of place.

In "*La balafre*" ["The Scar"], Rival raps the last verse and says:

We leave nothing to chance and nothing to anyone/ [missing word] *in showbiz as in the crowd*

[217] Being a nerve center for the exchange of goods, Belgium is a well-known European drug hub, with the Liège and Antwerp regions being the main historical drivers for narcotics import and export.

CNN until the end of our days/ And tell them we've got weapons too, not just words
We'll do it with the same determination/ We'll do it behind the microphone or in front of a police van
We can already boast of weighing millions/ Ask this country what my band is costing it
We'll keep making them pay for the doubt in our hearts/ We're the rage burning in the eyes of our brothers and sisters
[…] *I can't fail my role/ I've got the weight of all mine on my shoulders*

These lyrics shed light on the posture of the group regarding their commitment to hip hop culture. Rival asserts that he will always belong to CNN199, while declaring that he will retain the same determination in his action whatever the means employed (words or weapons).[218] He continues this reflection by asserting that he embodies the anger of his "brothers" and "sisters" wronged by Belgium's institutional structures, and reminds the listener that he carries a collective claim as a sort of megaphone for these groups. During the song's intro and outro, a male voice can be heard singing: "*It is CNN, now you know it is CNN*."

The spirit of this last sentence is best caught in the song "CNN199" in which the chorus starts by claiming: "*In the street and on vinyl records, we live like we rap*." Following on from this, Rival explains his approach in his verse: "*I'm spouting off with the aim of making everyone militate as a fervent servant of hip hop [...]/ Fuck your system on behalf of all those your flames may have carried away/ A generation that this whore of a mother country would have liked to abort*." In another track, "*Où tu crois qu'on va*" ["Where Do You Think We're Going"], the CNN199 rapper Ali Pacha explains: "*We fall from tiredness but we get up again/ We fight for the same dream of a revolution in mentalities*." All these lyrics help to grasp how this group embodies "street" and inner-city rap, which generally stays away from the circuits of "show business" industry while dreaming of a "societal revolution" through culture in priority. The lyrics of "*De jours comme de nuit*" ["By Day as By Night"] are driven by the same approach: "*Why should I give up my ass is not my thing/ I just represent the identity of our neighborhoods that's all/ […] Hip hop assault, we'll make our passage a hymn to resistance […] Your cops can always palpate my balls/ It's as it doesn't make any difference as our votes at the ballot box*."

[218] The mention of firearms by Rival should not be taken at face value, but rather as a form of cathartic artistic violence.

Finally, in "*Comme on est venu*," the most famous song by CNN199, Rival is solo, except for the chorus, on which Defi J sings in Arabic, and raps the following:

Destiny torn apart by borders, khoya/ […] In the name of which integration should I be another
Tell me [censored words in the original track][219] in the name of which laws do you murder our own/
[...] For the victims of your dirty politics, your dirty justice and your dirty cops [...]
Forever in the spotlight, even if it means seeing what little we have go up in smoke (so you know)/ The way we came, the way we will go

Again, addressed to all his "*khoyas*" (French slang derived from the Arabic, meaning "brothers"),* these lyrics affirm the rappers' commitment to always carry the social protest contained in their art no matter what the cost.

The music video was shot in Brussels and shows Rival going to various places, carrying a suitcase that reveals its contents from time to time. The first scene shows Rival in a record shop, looking at the vinyl. He pulls a CNN199 vinyl out of a bin and turns to see that a hooded person with no visible face is watching him. The next shot shows a suitcase with a CNN199 sticker, which is then opened to reveal that it contains only a blank sheet of paper. The next scene shows Rival and a group of band members strolling through the crowded Brussels streets of what we guess to be Schaerbeek. Rival comes across another member of the crew and gives him the suitcase, but no words or glances are exchanged. The hooded figure from the beginning of the clip reappears. We then see the CNN199 member with the suitcase walking in front of a vacant lot where graffiti artists are painting, before another member of the group arrives and takes the suitcase. It opens as he picks it up, and the viewer sees that the blank sheet of paper is filled with tags. The four members of CNN199 present in the clip (plus Defi J during the choruses) are then reunited, and the hooded person circulates behind them while Rival raps. Other members of the group are then seen picking up and walking with the suitcase, before the end of the clip shows Rival on a rooftop finally grabbing and throwing the suitcase into the void as he raps: "*Forever in the spotlight, even if it means seeing what little we have go up in smoke (so you know).*" One possible interpretation of the music video is that it represents the crew's adherence to the practice of hip hop as something rooted in and articulated around the reality of their daily lives. The suitcase carried and exchanged by the artists, containing a blank sheet

[219] The process used to censor the words in question is relatively well known in rap music and consists of reversing the sound signal so that the words are spoken backwards (although careful listening can identify it).

of paper that ends up being stylized and tagged before being thrown into the void, could represent this adherence to hip hop and an allegory for the first phrase of the chorus: "*The way we came, the way we will go*." The hooded figure who follows them in the shadows for most of the clip also contributes to this allegory, perhaps representing the symbolic figure of death in Western imaginary, i.e., the Reaper (here without the scythe), following the protagonist along their life rooted in hip hop.

Another Brussels (Schaerbeek)-based artist to have made a mark on Belgian rap in the 2000s is Pitcho, a rapper from Congolese origins. He made his official debut as a solo rapper[220] on the label Souterrain Production with his first album, *Regarde comment!* [*Look at How!*]. One of the album's songs is entitled "*Le bras en l'air, poing serré*" ["Arm Up, Fist Clenched"], and refers to Belgian colonialism in Central Africa and some of its contemporary consequences:

[Chorus 1]

I keep my arm in the air and my fist clenched/ For heads that have fallen and hands that have been chopped off

I keep my arm in the air and my fist clenched/ For our tribes in chains and our peoples enslaved

I keep my arm in the air and my fist clenched/ For our lynched brothers and our exiled families

I keep my arm in the air and my fist clenched/ I keep my fist clenched

[Verse 2]

It's amazing, they take the Mamadou and change them into Laurent, Simon/ Apparently that makes it softer. And for intellectual things it's no

It's well known that we're only good at being outside/ We're only good at sports and singing

But no matter how hard we try/ The chances are slim that things will change […]

With this they demand that we bow to their flag/ But their story of homeland doesn't really concern me

My battle lies elsewhere, far from their thoughts/ I'm just a young heir to the past, still irritated by its lies and truths

[Verse 3]

It smells like the abyss, it smells like sulfur/ When the explosion, they want us to go berserk

To fill the cells of their prisons/ So that they cast their contemptuous gaze upon us

[…] *Too proud and too bright like Black Star/ Black Star noisy*

[220] Pitcho began rapping in the Brussels group Onde de Choc (ODC), formed around 1995, a "second-generation group, following in the footsteps of Defi J, C.N.N., De Puta Madre and Starflam" (*Lezarts Urbains* 2008: 24).

Negro Spirituals instinct/ Ghetto-blaster for mine and basta! [i.e., that's it]

The title of the song itself, "*Le bras en l'air, poing serré*" ["Arm Up, Fist Clenched"], is a reference to one of the best-known symbols used in the Black Freedom Struggle, the raised (or clenched) fist. Used as a symbol of resistance and fighting for Civil Rights by the BPP and the Black Power movement, this symbol has survived the ages and been used in many subsequent political struggles or reconfigurations, as shown recently with the BLM movement. Its evocation by Pitcho provides another example of Francophone Belgian glocalization of politico-cultural symbols historically used in hip hop.

In the first verse, the rapper begins by talking about the racial hierarchy created by the ideology of racism, before evoking the situation and living conditions of people from sub-Saharan African immigrant groups in Belgium, and the possible consequences of their anger regarding the injustices they experience. The song's chorus differs as the listening progresses, with an unidentified male voice rapping the changing second part of the chorus, while Pitcho raps the unchanging first part. In the choruses, the artists denounce the abuses, exactions, acts of torture, and mass crimes committed in Central Africa by the agents of Belgian colonialism. The second verse begins by talking about certain issues relating to the inclusion of immigrant populations in Belgium, before evoking stereotypes and prejudices stemming from the colonial period and still present in certain mentalities today. Pitcho then presents himself as an individual who does not consider himself concerned by certain injunctions presented as "patriotic" or relating to "patriotism," and instead seeks to shed light on a few ghosts in Belgium's history.

At the start of the third and final verse, Pitcho returns to the state of anger he evoked before and to the resilience shown by the populations concerned, recalling the struggle of some of their ancestors. He ends with well-known references to the Black Freedom Struggle and black music. The former relates to the Black Star Line created by Marcus Mosiah Garvey[221] in 1919, as well

[221] Marcus Garvey is one of the most important figures of modern black nationalism. Born in Jamaica and founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in 1914, he moved to the US in 1916. As soon as he arrived, he noticed that nationalist and emigration movements were commonplace among African Americans. He decided to organize multiple UNIA offshoots across the US and thus inspired all the activists and thinkers who claimed to be part of this movement. It was in this way that figures such as Malcolm X grew up in families of pro-Garvey activists (see above). The Black Star Line was a four-ship shipping company created as part of Garvey's highly conversational ideology, which advocated the separation of black and white people (Van Deburg 1997). Indeed, he denounced the racist principle inherent in the American Constitution and institutions, and the racialization of social relations that made cohabitation between blacks and whites conflictual. According to Garvey, "it was only by separating themselves from the white world that Blacks could finally manage themselves freely" (Guedj 2004: 3). Actually, UNIA and Garvey favored selective emigration rather than mass exodus, in

as to the late-1990s duo formed by the US rappers Yasiin Bey (Mos Def) and Talib Kweli, called Black Star. In the final line, he mobilizes two cultural references well known to hip hop practitioners: that of "African American Spirituals" ("Negro Spirituals" or "Spirituals") and that of the "ghetto-blaster,"* or "boombox." The first reference, better known today as "gospel" and constituting "one of the largest and most significant forms of American folksong,"[222] allows Pitcho to introduce the second reference, which belongs to the symbolic imaginary of hip hop. In his lyrics, Pitcho seems then to be recalling the origins of hip hop culture by linking the spirituals with the ghetto-blaster.

The video for the song features a multitude of archive images and video excerpts from the Belgian colonization of Central Africa, interspersed with shots in which Pitcho appears on screen in front of the equestrian statue of Leopold II in Place du Trône in the heart of Brussels. This choice of location echoes the polemics and explicit demands for introspection made to the Belgian authorities by a part of the population since at least the 2000s in relation to its colonial history (see above). From the point of view of decolonizing public space, the issue at stake is the relevance of keeping this monument as it is, given that it was erected as part of a propaganda campaign to legitimize and glorify Belgian colonialism, to mask its inhuman nature and its breach of obligations to respect human rights and the rule of law. Pitcho challenges colonialism and the persistence of racism in contemporary Western societies, focusing on Afrophobia and negrophobia and making the links by looking at the contemporary context. In the following empirical section, I come back to issues related to decolonization and the ways through which certain Francophone Belgian rap artists have addressed it more recently.

On the same album, Pitcho released what is probably his most known song, "*Ma part du ghetto*" ["My Share of the Ghetto"]. The chorus sums up the message he asserts throughout the song: "*Take it, here's my share of the ghetto, I'm giving it to you/ I'm giving it to you, I make you a*

order to establish a powerful, fully independent state on the African continent (Robinson 2001: 25). Thus, "this polarization of Africa as a state linked to black destiny refers to the quintessence of what can be called 'black nationalism'" in its initial version (Chivallon 2006: 52). The predominance of the racial component in Garvey's thought is made very explicit. It is based on the referent of social race that he establishes the bond of common belonging between Africans, Africa, and descendants of Africa. Generally, for Garvey and people calling themselves black nationalists, it is ethnicity that makes it possible to imagine the possible national community; the ancestral experience of the individuals making up this ethnic community, "this famous diaspora that nationalism makes exist," remains deeply rooted in "the racialization of social relations" (ibid.: 40, 55).

[222] According to the Library of Congress, a spiritual "is a type of religious folksong that is most closely associated with the enslavement of African people in the American South. The songs proliferated in the last few decades of the eighteenth century leading up to the abolishment of legalized slavery in the 1860s" (n.d: n.p.).

gift of it/ On condition that I leave with my share of the cake/ 'It is in the underground that I have chosen my camp' [scratch of Lady N by DJ Le Saint], *here's my share of the ghetto*." This song is quite representative of the spirit and general approach of rap music and hip hop culture in Francophone Belgium at the time. Pitcho raps about belonging to the neighborhoods (of Schaerbeek) and to the street, while asserting his desire to escape the "misery" experienced by people living in disadvantaged neighborhoods. For example, he raps in verse two: "*I'm even giving you my share of joy and gaiety/ Even if it's misery that is awaiting me […]/ And if I've gone up to the mic/ It's to transcribe the facts like a camera/ No fiction, no gossip, no tittle-tattle/ No editing, just raw rushes like rage*." For Pitcho, it is then a question of establishing the truth about his daily life through the practice of rap music. Worth noting: the songs "Schaerbeek Est" ["East Schaerbeek"] and "Schaerbeek Ouest" ["West Schaerbeek"], released a year before the album as a maxi vinyl single entitled *District 1030*, deal with the same themes ("1030" is the postal code of the municipality of Schaerbeek). In the context of the album's release, Pitcho also performed a live version of "Schaerbeek Est" on *BX1 Today*, a program broadcast on Brussels regional television, Télé Bruxelles.[223]

The music video for "*Ma part du ghetto*" attests to the early democratization of the Internet and how certain rap artists were able to use these new communication tools to promote their artworks in the early 2000s. Platforms such as MySpace (created in 2003), Skyblog (created in 2002), and MSN Messenger (created in 1999) seem identifiable in the video. Along with the first search engines, these platforms spearheaded the use of the Internet by child or teenage "millennials" (people born from the early 1980s to the late 1990s). Around 2005, platforms for sharing videos, such as YouTube and Dailymotion, multiple discussion forums or (web)blogs about particular or generalist themes, and the earliest "social networks/media" for general audiences, such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter, emerged and exemplified "Web 2.0."[224] Speaking specifically of artistic creation, the latter permanently transformed the possibilities and tools for artists to create and promote their works. In the case of rap music, artists would use these tools to promote songs, demos, freestyles, compilations, mixtapes, music videos, shootings of live performances, etc. This new digital ecosystem was quickly introduced into the

[223] See *Pitcho W.K.* (2014), "Pitcho: DISTRIC 1030 (Schaerbeek) Live sur Télé-Bruxelles."

[224] Web 2.0, or the "participative Web," is characterized by the new functionalities it offers to users: content creation, interaction, and collaboration. It revolutionized communication and information technologies based on the promise of the democratization of information, greater proximity between individuals, and new economic models. Nevertheless, seeing the current "post-truth" era and the polarization observed online, it is doubtful whether these promises have been kept, even if the Internet and social networks do not represent the reality of a given society as a whole.

Francophone Belgian rap music art world, firstly for the distribution and promotion phase, but also a few years later for direct interaction with the audience and creation itself. For example, around 2005, this led to a diversification in the creation of mixtapes, as, after the DJ HMD era, a new generation has been able to take advantage of digital tools to distribute and communicate about projects on a wider scale (Schmitz 2017).

Coming back to the music video for "*Ma part du ghetto*," a lot of Belgian rap artists are present in it and some, and Pitcho himself, hold vinyl records up to the camera to show them off. The particularity of these records is that they are all historical works of Belgian rap, such as the BRC's *Stop the Violence*. Speaking of the chorus of the song, one of the lines ("*It is in the underground that I have chosen my camp*") is a scratch taken from a 1997 song by Lady N on the compilation *Phat Unda Compil* and called "Hip Hop Squad – Freestyle." Pitcho is once again referring to an important Francophone Belgian hip hop project from the 1990s, on which he himself was involved with Onde de Choc, his group of the time. In 2023, to mark the 20th anniversary of the release of the album *Regarde comment!*, Pitcho performed a show in one of the rooms of the Ancienne Belgique, one of the most important concert venues in Belgium. He concluded the concert playing "*Ma part du ghetto*" with some members of his team on the stage and then brought Lady N on stage to rap her own scratched passage.[225] The enthusiasm of the public attests to the importance of this project and the song that represents it for Francophone Belgian hip hop in the 2000s.

These developments about Starflam, CNN199, and Pitcho highlight again the major convention shared in the Francophone Belgian rap music art world about what can be defined as authentic rap music since the 1990s. This is a music that speaks of the street, of disadvantaged neighborhoods and populations, as well as all the outcasts of society, of their problems, their hopes, their anger, their disappointments, their resilience, their failures and their successes. Regarding commodification, the situation in the 2000s is unchanged from the 1990s. In fact, it is curiously similar. Music industry professionals are not structurally involved in the Francophone Belgian rap music art world and the inputs of these kinds of actors in the chains of cooperation are quite exceptional.

[225] See *Hip-Hop Belgium* (2023), "Pitcho – ma part du ghetto live ABclub 2023."

Like Benny B in the 1990s, Starflam would benefit from these kinds of inputs for the distribution and promotion of the album *Survivant* to a large audience. The project was released by EMI via Capitol Records, nowadays a subsidiary of Universal. Thanks to this integration into a professional music distribution network, the group would benefit from attention and visibility far beyond that of the Francophone Belgian rap music ecosystem of the time, and the project would be distributed on a much wider scale (see below). The band members would also advertise the album in their own circles. For example, I remember Baloji handing out flyers to students outside my elementary school[226] to promote the project's first single, "*La sonora*" ["The Sound"], which remains Starflam's best-known track. I was ten years old at the time, and Starflam was in every conversation about Liège news because the band's popularity gave visibility to their hometown. The song's chorus is quite well articulated on a kind of important principle in hip hop, that of resourcefulness, particularly when the resources needed to move forward in life are inaccessible in whole or in part for whatever reason: "*In these imperfect times/ For every cause an effect/ If this world is imperfect/ Your life is what you make of it*." Overall, the song and its music video are an ode to hip hop, which Starflam was determined to continue promoting. Indeed, as the first line of the song's bridge says: "*The sonora Starflam remains on the program*."

This rap, like that of CNN199, Pitcho, and many other artists of the time, is based on the classic hip hop tradition of protesting and calling for change. During a 2001 interview, Fred'Alabas, one of the Starflam members in charge of sound engineering and music production, and the rapper Baloji evocated the inherent "contradiction" related to the integration of protest rap music into the popular music market:

> The contradiction we were talking about is already there. We ourselves make music, entertainment [in English in the original quote], to relax people. But at the same time, we want to talk about serious things. It's a whole. It's a balance. We don't hope to change people. But maybe the music will give you that little something that will tell you to go on, don't let yourself go, don't fall asleep (in L.H. 2001: n.p.).

Nevertheless, the vast majority of these rap artists wanted to make a living from their art and no longer be forced to "combine work and late-night studio sessions with no media or structural

[226] Located near the Gare des Guillemins, Liège's main train station, the school (Institute Saint-Jean Berchmans and Sainte-Marie) is part of the Catholic education network in Belgium. Baloji had attended secondary education there and would sometimes return to promote his music. Baloji also advertised at other schools, such as the Athénée Royal de Fragnée in the same neighborhood, where my older brother was attending secondary school.

support" (Schmitz 2017: n.p.). The determination of some Belgian rap music pioneers to make a living from their art while being integrated into the music market would then diminish, while in France the rapper and later producer Booba released "*Repose en paix* [Rest in Peace]" in 2002. This song can be seen today as an important piece in the history of the commodification of Francophone rap music, stating: "*Nigga, I'm gonna do some shit and I'm gonna leave like in high school/ Here there's only one tide and it's dark black/ May French hip hop rest in peace/ Ladies and gentlemen! Down here to represent […] It was just a puzzle of words and thoughts/ May French hip hop rest in peace*." Almost 15 years later, Booba would play a decisive role in Damso's massive success, and, in this context, in a steady increase in the presence of professional music industry agents in Francophone Belgian rap channels and cooperation networks (see below).

In the early 2000s, another artist was able to benefit from a certain degree of integration into the professional music industry network. Having grown up in Waterloo,[227] James Deano began rapping in the mid-1990s and started to make a name for himself in the rap world in the early 2000s thanks to his impressive stage presence. He gained increasing recognition by participating in several music projects and events. He is, for example, featured on DJ HMD's mixtape *Les gens d'armes*. From Belgian and Italian origins, Deano was particularly distinguished as a rapper by his father being a police commissioner. This eventually influenced his storytelling to the point of naming his first album, released in 2008, *Le fils du commissaire* [*The Commissioner's Son*], the first single from which was released in 2007, entitled "*Les blancs ne savent pas danser*" ["White People Can't Dance"], followed by the album's title song at the end of 2007. Published with the important independent French music label Because Music, these singles proved very popular in Belgium and France, thanks in particular to the numerous TV broadcasts of their respective videos and James Deano's appearances on several TV shows, hosted by important and large-scale TV channels such as MTV and Canal+ (Dardenne 2007), as well as important national and regional radio diffusion of the songs on Skyrock and NRJ. James Deano emerged as a kind of emblematic figure in Belgian rap, at a time when it was going through a kind of crisis of representation following the decline of Starflam after Baloji's departure from the group (see below).

[227] Waterloo is one of Belgium's wealthiest municipalities, along with others in the same province, Brabant Wallon, just a few kilometers below Brussels. Historically, the municipality is famous for having been the site of the Battle of Waterloo during the Napoleonic Wars,

Presented by certain media as "the instigator of 'middle-class rap'" (*NRJ* 2008; *Wikipedia* 2023c), he is best known for his generally humorous tone, the comical aspect of some of his lyrics and his ability to parody artistic codes to develop his own approach of it. As he explained in a 2007 interview: "You have to admit, when you're young, it's not the best asset in your game if you want to rap [when you are the son of a police commissioner]. I had a hard time looking at myself in the mirror. But in the end, I was able to move on" (in Dardenne 2007: n.p.). In another interview, he returns to the context of the Francophone Belgian rap music art world in the early 2000s. He begins by explaining that, after deciding to pursue a living from rap music around 2000, he realized that "you no longer look at rap as a passion, but also think of it as a strategy." He continues:

> In our day, there was no Internet, so you had to go through the obligatory medium, which was radio. In the end, when you think about radio, you censor yourself, you train yourself even before the radio has asked you to, because you don't yet have any contacts. It really was a different time [...] we weren't like today's youth, simply because we didn't have our own media. […]
>
> Belgium is a tiny country split in two. There are six million Dutch speakers and four million French speakers [around 2017]. Among these, half are old people and another million don't give a fuck about rap. In the end, the potential audience you have left is very small. As a result, we're obviously looking at the French market and its rap. Apart from Starflam, no one had emerged beyond Belgium. Starflam were kind of the big boys. There was also a whole underground scene, made up of old hands like CNN or [De] Puta Madre. These were people I liked, but I didn't see them as role models (in *Abcdr du Son* 2017: n.p.).

Speaking about the deal he signed with Because Music for the release of his first album, he explains the potential difficulties he identified for his music career, arising from issues related to his legitimacy as a representative of Francophone Belgian rap music:

> Before me, the only rap project from Belgium that had made any headway in France was Benny B. So when I signed in Paris, a few people thought I was the new standard-bearer of Belgian rap. Except... I was from Waterloo, my father was a cop and I defused the mess by using humor. All this to say that I was the anti-hero of rap. On a misunderstanding, some people took me for the chosen one, for the guy who was going to represent the interests of an entire community. But I didn't ask for it. I didn't want that role. To make matters worse, I was naively entering the [music] market with an album entitled '*Le Fils du Commissaire*'... When I realized that I was going to have to play concerts in French *cités* as the son of a cop, I started to get anxious. To relieve the pressure, I smoked as many joints as possible. The result: I flipped out. All this partly explains why I took a step back in my musical activities (in *Larsen* 2022: n.p.).

About the creation of "*Les blancs ne savent pas danser*," for which a part of the inspiration can be found in the 1992 comedy film *White Men Can't Jump*,[228] Deano explains: "While I was finalizing the demos for *Le fils du commissaire*, I decided to do a song that was a bit more club-oriented. It was a time when rap was beginning to dare to move towards this kind of atmosphere, and I thought it was good, more open to something melodic." He continues:

> Here I'm going for something at 115 BPM,[229] writing just one verse and the chorus. The demo for this track lands with the others at Because [Music]. My artistic director is going to present my not-yet-finalized tracks to Laurent Bouneau at Skyrock.[230] When he listened to the demos, Laurent Bouneau said to my A.D. [i.e., artistic director]: 'This last song, '*Les Blancs ne savent pas danser*', if you complete it for me, I'll put it in rotation [i.e., repeated radio broadcasting of limited musical playlists].' You'd think the label would know what was of interest. And so do I. So I wrote the missing verses. We went into the studio straight away to make a clean, complete version of the song (in *Abcdr du Son* 2017: n.p.).

This example shows similarities with "*Vous êtes fous!*" by Benny B. While, contrary to Benny B, it was James Deano himself who thought to make a demo song with electronic music club inspiration, it was the assurance that the songs would be integrated into a professional publishing and distribution network that convinced these artists to finalize them. Moreover, in James Deano's case, the potential rotation on Skyrock promised by L. Bouneau was a guarantee of the song's success.

This song's popularity also owes much to its comic lyrics, with the chorus being: "*It's said that white people can't dance/ But that's not true!/ You know the truth/ Is that white people can't dance/ The only white man who can dance/ Is Michael Jackson!*" The rapper refers to Michael Jackson, the African American legend of contemporary popular song, dubbed the "King of

[228] Realized by Ron Shelton, the movie tells how two street basketball players, a white man interpreted by Woody Harrelson and a black man interpreted by Wesley Snipes, join forces to dupe the most seasoned players on Los Angeles' public courts through a variety of scams.

[229] Classical 1990s and early 2000s rap music is generally around 90 BPM while house, techno, or electronic club music is around 115–130 BPM.

[230] Laurent Bouneau has been the General Program Director of the French radio station Skyrock since 1995 and one of the main instigators of mainstream French radio's move towards rap music in the mid-1990s. In France, the law 94-88 of February 1, 1994, implemented since 1996, specifies that a minimum of 40% of the songs broadcast by French radio stations must be in French or by Francophone artists. Additionally, at least half of these songs must be categorized as "new talent" or "new production." Although mainstream radio stations, which played mostly English-language tracks, did not quite appreciate the legislation, some have taken the opportunity to re-establish their positioning, such as Skyrock: "Skyrock decided to switch to the Rap/R'n'B format in 1996, in large part to fill quotas easily, since French hip hop artists rap in French" (Chevalier 2015: n.p.). This quota policy was adapted in 2016 to ensure better application and thus continue to support the broadcasting of Francophone music production in France (*Arcom* 2024).

Pop," also known for having a depigmentation skin disease (vitiligo), in the aim of provoking the punch line of his joke articulated around racial stereotypes, namely that black people have "rhythm in the skin" and would be better dancers than other people. This stereotype was disseminated in the European collective imagination through colonization and its propaganda, particularly human zoos (Coutelet 2009). The music video also takes a humorous and parodic tone. It shows James Deano and some of his friends, all white men, strolling through the streets of a small town and gratuitously provoking every black person they come across into a dance battle. The group of white people show very limited dance skills, while the black people seem to be demonstrating more sophisticated and polished movements and choreographies. The lyrics and video are then designed to invert a certain perception of reality in order to frame the parodic approach, e.g., "*They say James Brown was a plagiarist/ Imitated John Travolta*."

While the media emphasized the humorous tone of this rap single, which soon became a hit in the Francophone area, things were more challenging for James Deano:

> I can see that my career is taking off, that the road is open. But I don't take it well. Why is that? Because I'm putting a lot of pressure on myself. I've got a good notoriety and I'm the first Belgian rapper to have such potential exposure on his hands. Starflam had had some real successes, but was at the end of its cycle and hadn't had all the opportunities I was getting. The problem was that I never identified with the Belgian rap scene. In Belgium, even though we were all naturally connected, there was no unifying spirit, no idea of uniting to go to France, which was ultimately the real market, where there was the biggest audience to reach. And now I find myself with all eyes on me, or at least that's how I feel. But I feel incapable of representing anything. For one thing, it's not in my character; I've always been rather distant from the notion of a team, and I've always felt more fulfilled as a soloist. But also, I come from a town next to Waterloo, which is the equivalent of the sixteenth arrondissement in France. People make up their minds, thinking that just because you live there, you're opulent, whereas to be honest, I've seen more bourgeois in Brussels than back home. And last but not least, my father's a cop, I'm white and I've got a sound club that's bound to attract attention. In short, on paper nothing fits and I don't feel legitimate at all (in *Abcdr du Son* 2017: n.p.).

He reflects on the issues of legitimacy, belonging, and representation of the Francophone Belgian hip hop movement at the time:

> Especially since my rap is already atypical. And because of the lack of legitimacy I gave myself, since in the end others never attacked me, it was already impossible for me to represent anything in this movement. I didn't even feel part of it. That's why I never did anything about it. And that was a problem, because when I signed to a label and got a bit of exposure in France, I was ultimately the only Belgian who could federate and pull the Belgian scene upwards. Even

> though Belgian rap didn't ask me for anything, I think there was a certain expectation that I should carry the flag (ibid.).

Because of his social origins, James Deano did not feel he had the legitimacy to represent or to be a kind of spokesperson of Francophone Belgian rap music, and, above all, never wanted this role. Even though *Le Fils du commissaire* did not necessarily reflect James Deano's music in terms of classical rap of the time (certain instrumental choices reflecting a more mainstream musical orientation, for example) and that his health difficulties prevented him from fully undertaking the album's promotional activities, his authenticity as a rapper seems never to have been really questioned by other rap artists or by the audience. After taking a break from music and starting a career as a stand-up comedian, James Deano has gradually returned to music and performs now at both comedy and musical events. The main difference with his early career lies in his willingness to dispense with a manager in the cooperation networks he mobilizes for the creation and promotion of his new songs: "Whatever happens, I want to remain free to make my own choices. Working with a manager[231] is out of the question. I've been there and I didn't like it at all. In fact, I have no strategy or career plan. I have stayed true to my habits" (in *Larsen* 2022).

These last developments are interesting to compare with those relating to Starflam and the release of *Survivant*. During the 2001 interview mentioned above with Fred'Alabas and the rapper Baljoi, they explained that Starflam performed a lot of live shows between 1997 (the release year of their first album) and 2000, before considering the potential opportunities for distributing the first album and the next one (*Survivant*, which was already almost fully mapped in 2000) in the French market. Fred'Alabas: "We did a lot of live shows, then we talked about releasing in France: which did not happen […]" Baloji: "Without being too calculating, when making music in French, it's inevitable. Belgium is limited" (in L.H. 2001: n.p.). In 1999, Starflam signed with Warner Music Group for the publishing of a few songs and a live

[231] While, in principle, the role of a manager in the music industry is limited to "the material acts specifically surrounding the organization of shows or public performances," the reality shows that the legal links between an artist and a manager can be far more complex. Indeed, "managers [...] often perform broader functions, such as legal and financial advice, artistic consultancy, etc. Furthermore, some managers act as artistic directors and decision-makers for the artist. They organize not only the artist's public performances, but also rehearsals for the show, and even rehearsals in general, sometimes becoming involved in the artist's entire creative activity, or in the continuity of his or her career. They will be involved, for example, in the artist's contacts and relationships with intermediaries responsible for promoting his or her work. By canvassing or performing functions akin to those of a music publisher, they may put the artist (the author) in touch with the producer. In return for this type of service, they will propose that part of the advances or royalties contractually due to the artist be reserved for them" (Henceval and Dufey 1996: 402).

recording. However, following the departure of Starflam's main contact at Warner, the respective perspectives envisaged by the group and the label no longer coincided. The group wanted to be able to distribute the album in France but the music company did not want to take that risk. It was at this moment that Starflam met people working for EMI and were able to release their new album in France with this major label (via Capitol Records): "But at Warner, there was a change of team. But they were correct. They let us go with all the material [related to *Survivant*]. We met other people who seemed motivated. In particular, to see what France thought."

When asked if "there was any hesitation in re-signing with a major after a bad first experience," Fred'Alabas first explained that the "dream" of the group would be "to be in self-production" but they did not have "the financial means" to do so:

> A problem we had with the first album. When you had a sign that things were starting to take off, you couldn't keep up, or you needed money to do concerts. With a multinational, we have the means to raise the level. Then with EMI, we can achieve a real collaboration. We take care of all the underground stuff, including street [in English in the original quote] communications and flyers, which we manage ourselves.

Baloji continued:

> Then, when we left our manager, they had to talk to us directly. They understood that we stick our noise into everything. They had listened to the first album, so they also knew who they were signing. In fact, what may have frightened the record companies may also have reassured them on the other hand, by saying to themselves: 'Well yes, they know what they're talking about'. When we talk about promoting in the street, or DJs to whom we have to give the record, it's us. It's interesting for them too, there's an exchange. The marketing plan is impressive, but that's just because they've combined the two techniques: what they normally do for Adamo[232] and what we generally do, and what all hip hop groups do (in L.H. 2001: n.p.).

To which Fred'Alabas added:

> We are in a country where radio doesn't really dominate, where TV doesn't play this music, so other media have been created. But these are not our ideas, they come from the USA. There's a grassroots, street-level approach that we're familiar with. It's important for us to keep this base. For example, the vinyl was released two weeks before the CD. All the people who follow us, or who listen to hip hop, the DJs, they get it in advance. It's normal, it's part of the story" (ibid.).

[232] Salvatore Adamo is a singer-songwriter of Belgian-Italian origins, renowned in France and Belgium.

In another interview, Fred'Alabas (in TBPRA 2002: n.p.) gave a brief opinion on the state of the Belgian Francophone rap "scene" at the time:

> Three or four Belgian rap records appearing simultaneously does not mean that there is such a thing as a scene. Record companies often see their national products as a tax deduction. That things are moving in Flanders, that's nice, but nothing more ... far from the situation in Holland. In France rap is very successful, but it is variety-rap, done from the portfolio. I fear that in Belgium the most interesting rap acts are still without a record company. But don't paint us as purists who systematically turn their noses up at successful rappers. As long as you don't lose your integrity as an artist, you can sell millions of CDs as far as I'm concerned.

These developments relating to the commodification and integration of Belgian Francophone rap into the music industry demonstrate the primary desire of artists at the time to be able to professionalize their art and make a living from it, as independently as possible in the chains of cooperation leading to the production and promotion of their songs. The main difficulty in the context of Francophone Belgium being the limitations of the music market, some artists like Starflam or James Deano wanted to distribute their songs on the French market. However, this required human and financial resources that were inaccessible to them without the direct intervention of multinational music companies. This highlights that, since the days of Benny B, things had not changed in the art world of Francophone Belgian rap music art world, in terms of the opportunities available for artists to make a living from their art, given that certain key agents in the music industry are not regularly present in cooperation chains and networks, namely for publishing and distribution to a large audience, and/or event booking and administrative management.

Section 3

Theoretical feedback (1993-2007): Challenging racism with "authentic" rap music in Francophone Belgium: The limits of institutionalization and commodification in the 1990s and early 2000s

The second part of the chronological empirical analysis (1993–2007) corresponds to what we could perceive as the beginning of a kind of nationalization of hip hop and rap music in Francophone Belgium. After the first local appropriations, reinterpretations, and glocalization of the 1980s and early 1990s, hip hop artists from Francophone Belgium continued to capture and translate national and regional imaginaries, as well as cultural, economic, and sociopolitical contexts in their own language. The compilation *Fidèles au vinyl* and the emergence of rap

music outside Brussels attest to a certain configuration in the ecosystem of artistic creation in Francophone Belgian rap at the time. Mobilizing the concept of the art world allows us to identify three main groups of agents regularly involved in the chains and networks of cooperation linked to these artistic activities (the artists and the technical collaborators, the silent partners and critics, and the consumer audience). The massive success of "*Vous êtes fous!*" demonstrates new inputs brought in by two new agent profiles in the specific chain of cooperation that gave rise to the production and publishing of this song (music publisher and various broadcasters).

By approaching artworks in Francophone Belgian rap in terms of the chains of cooperation that give rise to them, the inputs required for these chains, a certain idea of the work in question, and an adherence to a certain division of labor, the chronological analysis that follows highlights a certain diversification of this nascent art world in relation to the conventions that seem to be predominantly shared within it. A group such as De Puta Madre exemplifies this diversification of aesthetic codes and majority conventions when it integrates an explicitly cinematic dimension into the creation of its songs, and when it claims an artistic direction free of the institutional sociocultural sector in Francophone Belgium and from the socially conscious side of the hip hop movement of the time. The approach claimed by this group is intended as a kind of radical embodiment of a certain artistic spirit, of a certain hip hop state of mind. This approach is also embodied in the group's initiative to set up its own independent production label, as other groups have done, such as CNN199 and Souterrain Production, who claim that their rap music is protesting and challenging injustice, and therefore explicitly critical from a sociopolitical point of view.

On racism, the analysis shows first how a group like De Puta Madre addressed these issues in line with their own artistic approach. It appears that the hip hop state of mind claimed by the group leads them to avoid making themed songs and to prefer talking about it more implicitly in various songs, their aim being to underline the multicultural character of hip hop in a way that they consider above all aesthetic and subtle. A group like Starflam (Malfrats Linguistiques and H-Posse) takes another stance when realizing songs directly addressing racism, immigration, colonialism and some of its contemporary consequences in the context of 1990s Belgium, as does Daddy K when he raps about police abuse in a context of racial discrimination. Defi J also directly addresses issues related to racial discrimination experienced by certain minority groups while claiming that rap music and hip hop culture are engraved in his life. In

more general terms, other rap artists, such as Big Shot or Bienvenu-N-Sonar, seek to denounce in their own terms certain forms of subordination and instrumentalization of populations for political and economic objectives. In this context, the death of Semira Adamu sparked a reaction from the Francophone Belgian rap art world of the time, as this tragic event marked the end of the 1990s in Belgium, attracting unprecedented media and political attention to racially motivated police violence and migration policies taking liberties with respect for human rights.

At the end of the 1990s, the socially conscious approach of hip hop culture and rap music appears thus quite dominant in the Francophone Belgian rap art world and issues related to racism and racial discrimination are being challenged directly or implicitly by a variety of artists, questioning the social relations of race in different domains. The group CNN199, the rapper Rival, and the organization Souterrain Production provide other examples of such a state of mind. The situation regarding this majority convention in the Francophone Belgian rap art world would remain similar in the early 2000s, with Starflam, CNN199, and Pitcho, who used to directly tackle racism, racial discrimination, racialization or stereotypes and prejudices, Afro(negro)phobia, slavery, (Belgian) colonization and its links with immigration, as well as addressing concepts emerged from these topics, such as "Afropean" identities and issues related to decolonization in Belgium. This provides further demonstration of a certain politicization of Francophone Belgian rap during that era, which exhibited a strong consciousness of global issues related to the respect and enhancement of human rights. This protest rap embodies a dominant form of protest ideology rooted in the social and political, and widely present in the youth of the time. Most of these artists "live like they rap," making the defense of hip hop culture and rap music a priority rooted in their daily reality. Therefore, several markers of glocalization of politico-cultural symbols and references from symbolic imaginaries historically connected to US and global hip hop are still mobilized. The third space that would emerge from these marginalized voices and experiences participates in shaping their cultural identity through a process of alterity, emerging from postcolonial experiences and imagined solidarity among diverse racized populations. In so doing, this space provided by rap and hip hop would also allow a dialogue about racism between minority and majority groups.

Considering commodification dynamics of popular music and mass culture in the analysis helps to highlight the absence of certain key agents from the music industry in the artists' chains of cooperation and networks. The art world of Francophone Belgian rap music in the 1990s and early 2000s can be described as underground, in the sense that its regular structuring did not

allow artists to professionalize and make a living from their art. Considering the variable nature of the art worlds, we can nevertheless illustrate that the use of the mixtape format in the mid-1990s, then the mass democratization of digital communication tools in the early 2000s, as well as the creation of music production and promotion organizations by certain artists, enabled them to continue developing Francophone Belgian rap music by finding as many opportunities for it as possible. In order to deepen the analysis of the Francophone Belgian rap music art world with regard to commodification and professionalization issues, analytical developments about the careers of artists such as Starflam and James Deano can be mobilized to identify a few exceptional inputs and partnerships/agreements at that time between Francophone rap music artists and representatives from music industry companies and how these relationships could evolve in these cases, with artists looking to articulate professionalization with a maximum of independence.

The analysis of the public action related to youth cultural policy using hip hop until the early 2000s confirms the major trend observed in the previous part. The development of hip hop in Francophone Belgium was framed to a certain extent through a political mobilization of its use by state-subsidized not-for-profit organizations working in the scope of cultural democracy and embodying a particular interpretation of sociocultural action and lifelong education. Indeed, the 2000 and 2003 Decrees translate a politicized understanding of "culture" by the policies ruling this specific field of public intervention. While the latter understanding could contribute to the recognition of hip hop by fostering its institutionalization in the sociocultural sector, a growing number of hip hop artists started to express strongly their rejection of such categorization of their art at the end of the 1990s and in the early 2000s. In a concern to avoid instrumentalization by top-down public policy guidelines, several artists asserted their desire to be able to practice their art as they intended and fought for it to be recognized on their own terms to contest the place assigned to hip hop. Given the context of the youth cultural policy in Francophone Belgium, this meant that hip hop had to be recognized in the field of professional artistic creation, and not just in that of lifelong education and sociocultural action. To break down this kind of barrier, hip hop artists aspired to professionalization, to be recognized as artists in their own right (and not just as young people from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds expressing themselves artistically), so that they could work on the artistic quality of their art in a more sophisticated way. These developments also serve to underline the central role that street-level bureaucrats may have played in these processes, as I further discuss in the following chapter.

After the emergence and the first mainstream commercial success of Belgian Francophone rap, the 1990s and early 2000s highlights the artistic development of hip hop and rap music, as well as its relationship with the institutionalized sociocultural action. The next period analyzed marks the start of a new era of change in this art world from around 2010, with the arrival of a new generation of artists who would be able to learn from the experiences of the pioneers, while benefiting from some of the gains made by the latter in order to continue trying to unblock the road to professionalization.

Empirical analysis: 2008-2021

Chapter 11

Contemporary uses of hip hop culture and rap music within the youth cultural policy in Francophone Belgium

Section 1

Substantial discretion and implementation tricks institutionalizing rap music in the Youth Sector

Subsection 1: The practice of rap music in the "Musical Action Service"

This chapter begins by continuing the analysis of the creation and evolution of MAS with regard to the street-level bureaucracy model. Understanding the position of Etienne Droussin inside the YC Thier-à-Liège is crucial to understanding how he could use his room for maneuver in the framework of implementing sociocultural public action to create MAS and to develop it with the purpose he wanted. To implement his idea of giving access to a recording and mixing studio to young people, Droussin turned to the Youth Sector to advocate for the MAS project and obtain initial financing, using room for maneuvering based on daily professional experience. As Francophone Belgian hip hop did not have the same level of public recognition as it has today, it was impossible for Droussin to obtain subsidies or support from the institutionalized Music Sector in Francophone Belgium. However, giving an explicit sociocultural framing to the project made it fit into the approach of public action directed toward youth in Francophone Belgium:

> In the Youth Sector, we did not have too many difficulties, even though here the project should not be too cultural, it should focus more on young people who don't have the opportunity to rehearse and record in good conditions, so we offer them the means to do so, it's a question of reinforcing the social side of things to make it effective. They didn't care about the quality of the music for young people. But in the Music Sector, it was the opposite. Because they didn't give a damn about the whole process, and the group already had to be well known and have already done a lot of shows for them to start taking an interest in a group and agree to put a bit of money into it (Droussin 2018: n.p.).

The main point was therefore to set up a specific sociocultural approach in the initial project, starting it with the condition of working with young artists and practitioners from underprivileged areas. This situation explains the official creation of the MAS organizational structures under the frame of the YC Thier-à-Liège:

> This also explains the creation of the MAS [after the "First Takes" project], because it's clear that as [YC], when we entered our files, we had nothing at all in the Music Sector, whereas the MAS made a reputation for itself more in the cultural field […] We were in contact with the whole cultural milieu, not just the sociocultural youth centers. As a result, MAS's requests were taken much more seriously than those we made as a [YC]. That's why we created two different not-profit organizations, one to get funding from youth and the other from music-related projects (Droussin 2018: n.p.).

When emphasizing the sociocultural aspect of the MAS project by advocating affirmative action for disadvantaged young people willing to practice rap music in good conditions, Droussin used his discretion and played an implementation trick to align the project with the legal requirements of the Youth Sector, ultimately achieving some initial recognition and securing limited funding for MAS. Nowadays, MAS is recognized as one of the four "particular packages" created by the 2000 Decree, allowing the YC Thier-à-Liège to hire people to work exclusively at MAS (see below).

Another feature coming from the street-level bureaucracy analytical framework relates to inter-individual relations. The case of MAS provides an example of how such relationships can play a role in shaping and enhancing the substantial discretion of implementing agents to develop particular activities within their room for maneuver. Indeed, as the YC Thier-à-Liège has played an important role in the development of Francophone rap music, it could act as a kind of incubator for Belgian hip hop pioneers. This granted the YC Thier-à-Liège an esteemed reputation among other hip hop artists and a relevant network of potential partners, resources, skills, and competencies to mobilize for the development of the MAS project, or other projects related to hip hop and rap music. For example, as Magali Company highlighted during our interview: "I would say that what gave us leverage was specific features of the network of associations and youth centers [in Liège]. Like the Thier-à-Liège, for example, which has one of the finest musical experiences and know-how from the start" (2017: n.p.). Currently, the MAS team selects only one artist by genre each year. Concerning rap music, the dedicated hip hop and rap music not-for-profit organization Nectar (Musiq), based in Liège, took charge of this part from 2017 until early 2020, along with DeuxTreize, another rap artist from Liège, working permanently and exclusively for MAS. They assist the rap music artists in the production process of their songs or in the organization of rehearsals, as well as giving them advice and helping to identify opportunities to perform.

Nectar presents itself thus: “Nectar is a not-for-profit organization made up of a young multicultural and multidisciplinary team from the rising generation of Liège hip-hop (production, events, rap workshop and more)” (*Studio des variétés* 2024: n.p.). The organization was created around 2013 by Indocile, a Liège rap band comprising three rappers, Fonix, Komc, and Toucha. Etienne Droussin connected Nectar to the management of rap music in MAS because they themselves benefit from it, as Fonix, member of Indocile and coordinator for Nectar, explained to me during an interview in 2018: “We had a willingness to bring something new to this project because we benefited from it as artists and were very satisfied with the experience.” Nevertheless, regarding the contemporary context of the music worlds in terms of distribution and promotion, Nectar thought that the MAS project could be reinforced to develop and expand its initial purposes: “Music in 2018 is sold in other ways than only CDs. There are a lot of parameters that are important for an artist to simply be professionally supported, to be able to tour, to be marketed, to be able to make a living with his music. We bring that to the rap part of things” (Nectar 2018: n.p.).

The last outlook from MAS in recent years, aimed at proposing comprehensive and more holistic artistic support and development to young rap music artists, and not only good music recording conditions, has been brought to the table by Nectar thanks to its experience and good relationship with the people working at MAS. Coming back on the core reasons behind the foundation of Nectar, Fonix explained:

> We realized in 2012, when we wanted to release our first street project, that there were very few organizations to tour a band, to simply produce a band and we had to organize our first concert ourselves to actually perform […] And at that time we said ourselves why not to organize us because we also had a lot of requests from other groups.

Since they knew other rap groups would be interested in an organization based in Liège dedicated to the promotion and production of hip hop culture and rap music, when the YC Thier-à-Liège wanted to go further with the artistic support implemented through MAS, it was an opportunity for Nectar to collaborate by proposing a more accurate and complete artistic support for the young rap artists working there. Therefore, MAS could act as a kind of pre-label for young rap artists seeking to develop projects, as Etienne Droussin explained during our interview: “We’re not really a label, we see ourselves more as a pre-label. We don’t have any obligation to achieve financial results, but we can take our time with an artist without expecting any financial return. We’re subsidized without any commercial obligation” (2018: n.p.).

While the legal rules instituting the Youth Sector may appear rather vague or imprecise (fostering the development of "CRACS among the society"), these recent developments in the MAS project show how the discretionary power of Droussin acting as a street-level bureaucrat of the youth cultural policy in Francophone Belgium could fill in the gap and trick the policy implementation, allowing the creation of a relevant project both for this policy's general purposes and the potential motivations and desires of its targeted public. As this project and the previous initiatives related to it were among the first in Francophone Belgium to focus on hip hop culture and rap music, it seems that Etienne Droussin and the staff of the YC Thier-à-Liège could have a concrete policymaking role regarding public action using hip hop and new orientations in the youth cultural policy implementations in Francophone Belgium beginning in the early 1990s, highlighting the critical role that "street-level-bureaucrats" can have in public policy framing.

Indeed, when responsible policymakers modified the former rules of the Youth Sector and adopted the 2000 Decree (last modified in 2008), they introduced a new legal device by relying on YCs' field practices. This device is called "particular package" and allows YCs to obtain "an intervention on the salary cost of a complementary worker for youth centers developing particular actions, synergies or specific services" (Broché 2016: 197). This intervention must concern four types of particular package. One is called "permanent support for the expression and creation of young people" and was designed "to support and develop these abilities in youth through the use of one or more modes of physical, artistic, and sociocultural communication or expression" (see 2000 Decree: Chapter 2). This particular package allows YCs to develop "professional quality skills and services, especially, but not exclusively, in the field of music (recording studios, live music booking, etc.)" (Broché 2016: 200).

Today, MAS is recognized as a particular package for the permanent support for the expression and creation of young people, allowing the YC Thier-à-Liège to hire people solely for working at MAS:

> In the MAS structure, all the workers are from the youth center, they are hired by the YC but only work at the MAS, and the MAS is the permanent support for the expression and creation of young people process. The youth center is included in this category in the Decree particular package via the MAS. It's the MAS that is the youth center's particular package (Droussin 2018: n.p.).

It appears that the implementation trick at the basis of MAS could foster this kind of change and adaptation in the rules of this public policy field. This would stress again the critical role of the implementing agent acting as a concrete policymaker as the particular package makes it possible to "develop and strengthen the sociocultural identity of youth centers, as well as anchoring them in the local cultural milieu, since it encourages networking with other young people and outside actors for the dissemination of productions, and requires that the activities proposed be open to the public outside the center" (Broché 2016: 200).

Coming back to Nectar, the shared responsibility of this organization for the successful implementation of the rap component of the MAS project highlights the importance of inter-individual relations in the role played by Droussin in this case. While Nectar was created by Indocile in order firstly to facilitate the development of artistic activities, the organization currently carries out several activities such as events organization, music label production and management, as well as rap writing workshops in various institutional contexts. Regarding music production and management, Fonix explained that during the early years of Nectar (approximately 2013–2018), they had some difficulties in finding structural subsidies for these activities and so had to focus mainly on the events organization aspect to make the organization live. Nevertheless, when Nectar started to implement rap writing workshops[233] in the frame of the 2003 Decree for Lifelong Education, it could benefit from first subsidies and institutional recognition of greater scope. While these sociocultural activities were not necessarily part of Nectar's initial project, they have proven to be indispensable towards implementing the other aspects of its activities in relation to the production, management, and development of hip hop artists. In this context, the partnership with MAS helped Nectar to develop its activities "in terms of development and support of artists" (Nectar 2018: n.p.).

This example appears interesting in relation to the question of the effects that public action using hip hop can have on the artists themselves. While appropriating the operating codes and the framing of the youth cultural policy and sociocultural action in Francophone Belgium, Nectar could start to implement its main project around developing professional hip hop careers. In this regard, it could use substantial discretion and an implementation trick within public

[233] It was during 2016 that Nectar began implementing rap workshops to "introduce a young audience to rap culture and its many facets." Based on a "pedagogical" approach, the aim is also to offer a "tool for socialization and emancipation." The target audience ranges from 8–25 years old (divided into two groups: 8–12 and 13–25), and the workshops are offered to organizations or initiatives in various institutional sectors in Francophone Belgium, such as schools, libraries, prisons, public youth protection institutions, and cultural centers (*Nectar* 2023: 28).

sociocultural action using hip hop to try to develop this latter more broadly, while remaining within the overall framework of the 2003 Decree. These developments, specific to the context of youth cultural policy in Francophone Belgium, show how hip hop and rap artists can play a critical role as street-level bureaucrats, or maybe "hip hop street-level bureaucrats," to foster the development and recognition of hip hop culture and rap music in Belgium.

Subsection 2: A full participant experience starting from Liège

Although this was not the case when I conducted a semi-structured interview with Fonix (in 2018), I have been a member of Nectar's general assembly since 2019. From the beginning of my activities in hip hop culture and the local rap scene around 2009, I have often thought that organizations of this type dedicated solely to the development of hip hop and rap were sorely lacking in the Liège region, so I gladly accepted this position.

Being born in 1991, I have always listened to hip hop/rap music on French and American radio and TV, and my older brother and my older sister, born respectively in 1984 and 1986, introduced me to the classic songs and artists of American, French, and British rap, hip hop, and R&B.[234] Having always enjoyed music in general, my early teens were also marked by starting to learn music and electric guitar, and listening to folk, (pop/funk) rock, and (nu) metal music groups, especially from California, such as Korn, Linkin Park, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers.[235]

With this musical background, it was only natural that I should be attracted to the hip hop movement. I started getting involved in local hip hop communities around 2005 by hanging out at the Cointe Skatepark,[236] in the heights of Liège, not far from the city center, by meeting friends during secondary school, or by hanging out around the city and cultural events. I then started deejaying and collecting hip hop vinyl records in 2008 with a friend from Liège, DJ Ojjo.

[234] Such as Dr. Dre, the Wu-Tang Clan, Missy Elliott, Beyoncé and Destiny's Child, Aaliyah, Craig David, Suprême NTM, IAM, Lunatic (and Booba), and the Fonky Family.

[235] I also enjoyed classical music and certain electronic music sub-genres such as house music (Daft Punk for example). Other musical genres, such as reggae (mainly Bob Marley), French songs, pop music (such as Michael Jackson), and soul and funk music, also lulled my childhood and adolescence thanks to my parents, themselves music lovers who practiced music.

[236] The Cointe Skatepark, opened in the 1970s, is a well-known venue for skateboard, BMX, and roller skating practitioners thanks to its various facilities (ramps, bowls, rails, quarter pipes). The park also features a large wall for graffiti artists surrounding a basketball and football field. It is one of the Liège's historical venues for hip hop meetings and events.

A year later, we set up the Under Tha Bridge collective to organize free and open-air hip hop block parties under various bridges in the center of Liège, targeting anyone who would be interested in listening to music and/or dancing in open-air. Other friends joined us in the adventure and since then we have organized several types of events (concert evenings, art exhibitions, graffiti jams, sports events such as dance, basketball, and football tournaments), sometimes in partnership, outdoors or indoors in many party halls in Liège and a few times in Brussels.

In 2010, I joined (as second DJ) a local rap group called Fragn's Bridge, comprising two MCs, Mr. Rouge and MoCashMo, and two DJs, R100 and myself (Selack). As the other three members of the group were older than me and had already made their mark in local hip hop, I had the opportunity to learn a lot from them from both artistic and human perspectives, while also building up my first concert and radio experiences as a hip hop/rap DJ. With this enlarged collective, Under Tha Bridge/Fragn's Bridge, I got my start in local Liège hip hop and got to know pioneering figures such as Kaer from Starflam, with whom we had the opportunity to work, towards a concert he was co-organizing in the center of Liège to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Youth Aid Decree.[237,238] That same year, as Fragn's Bridge, we were involved in the production of a song and the organization of a concert celebrating the 15th anniversary of the Ultras Inferno, a fan group of the local football team, the Standard de Liège.[239] I also remember the many times we were able to perform our songs on various stages in Liège, including "*A préciser*" ["To Be Specified"], which was due to feature on an album we completed in 2012, before changes in the personal lives of some of the group members led them to stop making unremunerated music due to time constraints, like many artists of this generation in Francophone Belgium. Mr. Rouge performed the first verse of the song as part of a freestyle rap project featuring many rappers in Liège by DJ Sonar during 2011 and 2012:[240]

Hey yeah, hey yeah, all the way to you we've come/ With attitude ["tenue" in French] *and no holds barred*

To say what we think/ With a minimum of common sense

[237] This decree contributes to the framing of the social public action toward youth in Francophone Belgium.

[238] See the post-event video realized for Spray Can Arts (a Liège not-for-profit organization promoting hip hop culture, graffiti, and street art, with which Kaer was organizing the event following a request from the Francophone Belgian Youth Aid Department), *DidierPremier* (2011), "20 ans DAJ by Spray Can Arts."

[239] See the music video, *Laswagtv* (2011), "Ultras Inferno 15 ans."

[240] See [DJ Sonar] *Orban Jean-François* (2012), "Escalators Mr Rouge Capsule#112" (starting from 0:40).

Go ahead badmouthing even if it doesn't go my way/ My interests, anyway, it's been a long time that I've been doing without it

For the love of the gab, it's in the blood/ Until the end of the match, you're crazy, it's not yet half-time

You've caught the plan/ It's the sound that wins out, his mystery, his resourcefulness, you see red in the TV ["poste" in French]

It seems to me/ That you're quickly traumatized

The loop is full it doesn't take much for it to overflow/ But rhyme is queen

And I have more than one string to my bow, DJ, sound system, people who work hard/ MC, b-boy, a blow of spray can in the throat and if it breaks out the ground is that there are some who support

As his lyrics show, Mr. Rouge wrote the song as a tribute to the strength of hip hop.[241] It was always one of the last songs we performed on stage, often the last. Indeed, the artistic constancy of our approach was to continue to defend a rap practice rooted in its historical hip hop cultural baggage.

From 2008, I gradually began to build up my own home studio for composing instrumentals, mainly hip hop and rap music but not exclusively. Then, I began to record and mix various local rappers and singers. As a composer, mixer, and/or DJ, I could work in the studio and perform concerts with a variety of local artists, such as the rapper Vinz (with whom we had a weekly hip hop/rap radio show from 2012–2014 on 48FM),[242] the rap group Les Anonymes, or the singer AA, to name but a few. After obtaining my master's degree in 2016, I worked most of 2017 at the Youth Centers Federation in Francophone Belgium (hereafter YCF), which enabled me to finance my entry into the doctoral pathway, while continuing in a reduced capacity my activities related to hip hop and local rap.

[241] While Mr. Rouge did not take inspiration from it, I always saw similarities in the respective approaches of "*A préciser*" and the famous 2009 single by the Brussels rapper Rival "*A la vie à la mort*" ["To Life and Death"], with whom some members of the collective had already shared studio time based on Brussels-Liège hip hop connections at the time. It is interesting to note the subtlety of the song's pre-chorus, which appears at the end of each of the three verses: "To each his own bars, nightmare of a dream life/ A little of demago'[guery], we rap and others die." There are other interesting lyrics regarding the context of Francophone Belgian rap at the time, such as "Play my rap on the radio if you get the chance," "Destiny of illegals, calm, storms," "Rival is a knife in the heart of the variet' [i.e., variety music or Francophone Belgian rap songs considered by certain people as inauthentic]/ Let there be no misunderstanding with your celebrities." The chorus returns to the basics: "In the waves, under the sea (represent hip hop)/ From hate to love (represent hip hop)/ On stages, on walls (represent hip hop)/ To life and death ("represent" "hip hop" [scratches by DJ Le Saint, in English in the original lyrics])." The music video pays tribute to Belgian and Brussels hip hop. Throughout it, we can see a wasteland where Rival raps in front of CNN199 tags, with a DJ scratching on his turntables, interspersed with inserts showing large graffiti murals. A dancer also performs hip hop dance moves, and, in other scenes, we see hip hop figures close to Rival, as well as views taken from a rooftop over the city of Brussels.

[242] 48FM is a free expression associative radio station from the students at the University of Liège with a vocation of lifelong education (CSA 2018). The radio station is also known for its eclectic music programming.

Section 2

The Youth Centers Federation in Francophone Belgium: Mobilizing hip hop and rap while considering the youth as artists

As my master's thesis discussed the political dimension of hip hop culture in the US, I was approached by the YCF to write the editorial for the first issue of its new magazine (the *Swap Magazine*, launched in 2017), an issue exclusively dedicated to hip hop. Following this editorial, I was offered the position of social issues advisor and project co-animator. This section analyzes the "Another Don Juan" project implemented by the YCF, as well as other projects in which I have been involved as part of my role in this organization. The YCF is the largest YCs federation in Francophone Belgium and is present throughout the region, starting with Liège and Brussels, and having an office in both cities. "Another Don Juan" is a recurring project that brings together YCs from these two cities, among others, and serves to exemplify the approaches and the methods implemented by the YCF.

As Antoinette Corongiu, former YCF director, pointed out to me when I joined, the YCF stands out from the other YCs federations in Francophone Belgium for its particular interest in mobilizing creative and artistic approaches and practices in its methodologies regarding sociocultural public action directed toward youth. This organization has been involved in many hip hop- and rap-related projects. The YCF was founded in 1950 under the name *Fédération belge des Maisons de Jeunes et de la Culture* (Belgian Federation of Youth and Cultural Centers), at a time when Belgium had not yet initiated its federalization process. The organization is known for its leading role in shaping the 1971 Royal Decree and the 2000 Decree regulating the Youth Sector (Broché 2016).

As stated in "the declaration of principles of the YCF and its members," this YCs federation asserts as first principle its independence and pluralism and rejects any association with a particular political ideology or party. The second and third principles concern "places for emancipation" for youth and implementation of the notion of "CRACS." The sixth and eight principles concerns "practice of democracy" and "participation processes" for youth. The ninth principle is the one underlying the main characteristic of this YCs federation compared to the others, since it establishes artistic and creative expression as one of the main tools useful to the missions of YCs related to sociocultural action and cultural democracy: "Sociocultural practices and artistic expression are seen as a privileged tool for fulfilling the missions of YCs. The YCs

encourage expression, exchange and sociocultural practices. They encourage creativity and initiative, innovation and experimentation by proposing actions that articulate approach and results. In this way, they promote cultural democracy." The eleventh and last principle argues for "plural cultures": "YCs are active in the cultural field. Their aim is to promote the many and varied cultures of young people. YCs aim to encourage the expression of the diversity of these cultures and to guarantee young people equal access to all forms of culture" (*YCF* 2024: n.p.). More than 120 accredited YCs are affiliated to the YCF, more than half of the YCs in Francophone Belgium, making it the largest YCs federation of the seven existing[243] (*YCF* 2024: n.p.).

Article 8 of the 2000 Decree describes how not-for-profit organizations can be recognized as a YCs federation. Moreover, the seven YCs federations are all recognized as "Youth Organizations" (hereafter YO) by a 2009 Decree creating and regulating five categories of YOs. The YOs are therefore five other types of not-for-profit organizations recognized by the youth cultural policy in Francophone Belgium, in addition to the three categories of YCs. The common goal of all these organizations is sociocultural action aimed at youth to encourage the development of "CRACS." The general purpose of this public action is thus regulated by three main legal instruments, the 2000 Decree (about YCs), the 2003 Decree (about Lifelong Education), and the 2009 Decree (about YOs).

When I worked at the YCF, one of the most important projects was called "Another Opera" ("*Un Autre Opéra*"), a recurrent YCF project revisiting famous opera pieces by youth contributing to activities implemented by various localized YCs members of the YCF. This project was not part of my direct attribution, but, sharing my office with the pedagogical team responsible for sociocultural projects within the various YCF workgroups, I was able to follow its implementation very closely, and took part in the design, implementation, and evaluation of other hip-hop-related projects in the YCF.

The fourth edition of "Another Opera" gathered approximately 100 youths between 12 and 26 years old of various cultures and backgrounds from 13 different YCs who worked for the project

[243] The Youth Centers Federation in Francophone Belgium (FMJ [YCF]), the Youth Centers Federation in Popular Milieu (FCJMP), Federation of Youth Centers and Youth Organizations (FOR'J), Federation of Information and Documentation Centers for Youth (CIDJ), the Federation Infor Jeunes (Infor Jeunes), Professions and Studies Information Service (SIEP), and the Youth Hostels (LAJ).

from October 2016 to May 2018. This edition revisited the classic opera *Don Giovanni*, with music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. The YCF revisited version is called "Another Don Juan" ("*Un Autre Don Juan*") and was co-coordinated with the Royal Opera of Wallonia-Liège (hereafter ROW), one of the three most important opera centers in Belgium. The four sold-out representations were performed in May 2018 on the stage of the ROW[244] (*YCF* 2019). The project's primary objective is to empower young individuals by providing them with a platform to express themselves through a contemporary reinterpretation of a classic opera. This initiative encourages youth to engage in remixing the opera by using their preferred artistic forms, such as dance, singing, rap music, playing instruments, acting, or photography. As Cécile Lebrun, choreographer and pedagogical coordinator of the project for the YCF, explained to me during a 2017 interview, this collaboration between the YCF and the ROW began in 2010, starting with the revisiting of *Carmen* (then *La Traviata*, *Aida*, and *Don Giovanni*). Valérie Urbain, leader of educational and social projects, is the person in charge of the coordination of the "Another Opera" projects for the ROW.

A professional support team of artists and technical collaborators external to the Youth Sector and linked with ROW supervised several artistic trainings and workshops aimed at the youth participating, along with animators and coordinators from YCs and the YCF. This represented a major investment of time and energy for the young participants, given the duration of the project and the need for them to be available on Sundays, public vacations, and holidays to create and rehearse the show. Obviously, there was no casting and the only condition required to participate was motivation, and attending a representation of *Don Giovanni* held at the ROW at the end of 2016, to see the original version of the opera. After this, the implementation of the project could begin; the first workshops were aimed at identifying and discussing shared-interest themes and perspectives among the youth addressed by this opera. Working on how the youth could appropriate it with their own competences, talents, and experiences was the other aim of the trainings and workshops. This is how the script for the show came out: "To our knowledge, this is the first time that Don Juan is a multiple being embodied by ten characters, both boys and girls" (Lebrun, in *YCF* 2019: 12).

The Liège rap group and collective AMB'N (Ambiance Néfaste) wrote all the lyrics for the rap and slam parts in several acts of the opera, including a full one, as well as all the original and

[244] A full recording of the show realized by RTC, the local TV channel in Liège, is available at the following address: *FMJ asbl* (2019), "Un Autre Don Juan."

remixed musical soundtrack. At the time, the group comprised four MCs, AK-Flow, KY4420, Prophesy, and TXK (nowadays Kurosawa). The Liège composer/beatmaker Hopium Beatz was creating almost all the instrumentals for the group and thus contributed to "Another Don Juan" as an external artist. As they explained to me during a semi-structured interview in 2018, the group emerged around 2012 in the YC of Saint-Nicolas (in the urban area of Liège) following the participation of its members at several sociocultural projects implemented by it or related to hip hop and rap music in the Youth Sector. Following these projects, the group had a good reputation in the Youth Sector. For example, in 2014, AMB'N performed on stage at the second edition of the Street Band Festival created in the early 1990s by the YC Thier-à-Liège. Having seen AMB'N on stage on several occasions, people at the YCF advocated charging them with the framing of the hip hop and rap aspects of "Another Don Juan," which was immediately accepted by the other project enablers.

Personally, I met AMB'N in 2017 when I was co-organizing a public debate about hip hop culture for the YCF at the 10th edition of the *Foire du livre politique* (Political Book Fair) in Liège, an annual event founded and co-organized by Jérôme Jamin (professor of political science at the University of Liège), aimed at "creating an annual network of all those involved in the production, publishing, distribution and use of political books, magazines and journals" (*ULiège* 2019: n.p.). This roundtable, which was in a way the first full participatory observation specifically related to this research and which I co-organized myself, talked about preconceived ideas about hip hop culture. Inspired by the book by Anthony Pecqueux challenging preconceived ideas about rap music (*Le Rap* 2009), the idea was to understand how stereotypes and amalgams regarding hip hop culture and its artistic disciplines could be explained and how to broaden or deconstruct certain readings about it. Knowing that AMB'N had already taken part in previous editions of the Political Book Fair with the YC Saint-Nicolas, I asked them to take part in the debate. The rapper AK-Flow agreed to participate in the roundtable, before rapping a text he had written especially for the occasion.[245] Magali Company (for the YCF), Alain Lapiower (for Lezarts Urbains), and Marco Martiniello (director of this thesis and of the

[245] For example, in 2016, AMB'N and the YC Saint-Nicolas took part in the event within a debate on the place of women and equal opportunities, performing a rap text by AK-Flow and a choreography by a female collective from the YC. In 2015, this same collective also took part in the event, with all the members of AMB'N at the time performing several of their lyrics and songs. Following various reactions to this performance, both positive and negative, Marco Martiniello and Vanessa Vandijck (coordinator of the YC Saint-Nicolas) initiated a cycle of meetings between certain members of the group and representatives of social sciences in the University of Liège. The idea was to get together to exchange views on each other's perspectives and social analyses, and to decompartmentalize networks that are not necessarily used to talk to each other, notably by discovering each other's respective medium of expression: rap music for some, and academic work and research for others.

ULiège research center CEDEM (Centre for Ethnic and Migration Studies)), also participated.[246]

Following my various experiences at the YCF, I began to investigate the question of the use of hip hop for public action by the youth cultural policy in Francophone Belgium. Coming from a generation of Francophone Belgian hip hop artists who benefited from the achievements of previous generations, I never needed the YCs to practice hip hop and rap music, as I had local networks of collaborations and partnerships that were independent of them. Indeed, while in the early 2000s the other members of Fragn's Bridge used to meet and work at a YC in the city center of Liège (the YC Péry in the little neighborhood of Pierreuse), where Magali Company had initiated a long-term hip hop and rap process, they became autonomous from this YC around 2007. Among the other members of Under Tha Bridge, while some had discovered the practice of hip hop culture through various YC events (notably graffiti and street art workshops during the vacations around 2005, which were also organized by Magali Company), they all practiced it in their own way outside this type of organization. None of the other artists I worked with had any contact with the Youth Sector, apart from one-off participation in one event or another. I thus discovered this sector in the frame of my collaboration with the YCF.

Coming back to "Another Don Juan," AMB'N highlighted their pride and satisfaction in having been involved in such a project: "It's been gratifying because they've really brought together the pedagogical and the artistic. Yes, there were artistic frustrations here and there, which is normal because we don't all have the same rhythm, but it's been magical for everyone [involved]" (2018: n.p.). While the group took shape after meeting each other at the YC Saint-Nicolas, the members had decided at this time to gain greater independence from the Youth Sector. The "Another Don Juan" project was then an opportunity for them to assert this position:

> One thing we've managed to do is get into their heads as Ambiance Néfaste [AMB'N] and not as young people who go to YCs. Because now we're trying to tour [at local stages], we're trying to tell them '[AMB'N] is a [rap music] group, this is what we do, etc.' And they've managed to understand, but it took a long time, it's a crazy thing (2018: n.p.).

[246] The rapper Akro, from the group Starflam and nowadays editorial chief of the media *Tarmac*, dedicated to urban cultures (see below), was also due to attend, but was unable to do so.

Given the investment in hours and energy required to write the rapped and slammed parts of the revisited opera, the group was able to negotiate remuneration in line with the standards for this type of artistic intervention when working with partners from outside the Youth Sector.

Speaking more generally about collaborations and partnerships with the Youth Sector and specific expectations of it in this type of project, the group underlined: "After a few years you come to the conclusion that when you're part of a project, they will get what they want from you and you will get what you want from them [...] as long as I don't feel I'm being taken advantage of" (2018: n.p.). On the relevancy of using hip hop in such projects and for youth cultural public action, the group highlighted:

> Hip hop has brought this freshness to something where you would expect things to be a bit more coded compared for people who go to the opera. And that's good. Once again, it's a kind of mixing of worlds, of decompartmentalization between two worlds. You see, we don't stop doing that, decompartmentalization, I swear (2018: n.p.).

As explained throughout this research, hip hop and rap being an essential part of the cultural identity of a large segment of contemporary youth, it is only reasonable that the YCF continues to mobilize it for sociocultural projects aimed at putting the youth at the center through active participation. According to AMB'N, there are indeed common objectives between practicing hip hop and implementing sociocultural public action, including critical thinking skills, and interest in and analysis of social issues. Nevertheless, the group members highlighted certain risks and potential difficulties inherent in this type of partnership, which relates to the previous developments about categorization and instrumentalization of hip hop by youth cultural policy in Francophone Belgium: "It's sad that you always have to fit yourself into a box to be validated [in the framing of such projects]." The group compared this situation with that of other artistic disciplines, pointing out that rap music does not receive the same treatment as these:

> In fact, when you do paintings, when you do any other style of music, you have more freedom to talk about what you want than when you do rap. Because rap comes with so much baggage, people expect something. So when it's in environments like that, where the local government or whoever's involved in the thing, they don't particularly want to be associated with all that stuff. That's the only thing that scares me, because I think: 'Fuck, at some point you're going to end up in the thing that's supposed to say to people "wake up," and you're going to end up with zombies.' And that's my biggest fear. I don't want to end up with something where rap is diluted because people have to be too careful about what they say, etc. [...] You have to respect

> what people say [...] Artistic freedom must be respected, even if it's a bit framed, but it mustn't be instrumentalized (2018: n.p.).

This thought can be compared with one developed by Jérémy Piolat (2023: n.p.) about rap music as a tool for public cultural action. According to him, rap music in Francophone Belgium has been "contained" and "invisibilized" by sociocultural action and its ambitions:

> I think they never developed rap, they contained it. I think [Francophone Belgian rap] developed when the business came along and Damso signed to an important label. In fact it was Booba [with the label 92i, attached to Capitol Music France]. There's Shay [Francophone Belgian female rapper, see below] who was spotted by Booba [in 2011] and if I'm not mistaken, she showed him Damso.

He developed this by linking to the issue of obtaining state subsidies:

> For me, the not-for-profit sector has made rap invisible […] So maybe some people will be very happy to play an instrumentalized and above all inoffensive concert […] Capital is not moral. But if the state starts subsidizing lyrics that say: 'I'm going to burn your car and fuck your mother the whore-police commissioner,' you say: 'Bah no.' Or you'd have to explain the scam to us. We don't believe it, the scenario doesn't work anymore. If there was a guy who got away with it, who had made millions and then said: 'They're making me laugh, I was insulting them, they subsidized me,' so much the better, thank you. I thank the state. But it didn't come to that because it didn't happen.

While these last developments can be read in the same way as those from the previous parts regarding rejection of categorization and instrumentalization by the Youth Sector and other institutionalized public policy fields, this does not imply for hip hop artists that all collaborations of this type should be rejected. As AMB'N observed during our 2018 interview, it would be more a question of ensuring that the various stakeholders understand each other's expectations, with the view of accepting and eventually sharing the codes that prevail on both sides so that each party can be satisfied with the collaboration.

For example, David Téti mentioned during our interview an important project he was co-organizing with hip hop artists from Herstal. Aiming to value local hip hop while offering a family-friendly event, Téti and the Herstal Youth Department initiated in 2019 an annual festival (the Herstal Urban Festival) to promote urban and hip hop cultures in Herstal though rap music concerts, deejaying, dance, graffiti, and skateboard and BMX routes. The project has

been developed with youth from various neighborhoods in Herstal, involving them in every phase of the organization, and partnerships have been forged with various local institutions and associations based in Liège. In a video report produced "to highlight the whole socio-educational and cultural process of the Herstal Urban Arts Festival,"[247] Téti highlighted that "the Herstal Urban Festival is above all a tool for cultural democracy."[248] During our interview, Teti (2021: n.p.) underlined the necessity of collective elaboration and implementation of such events, as well as their capacity to valorize the youth involved and their cultural and artistic identity:

> There's also a beacon that needs to be lit collectively, by saying: 'We all agree that, ultimately, a cultural democracy can be the fact of highlighting urban arts by making them family-oriented, which will enable families to come at their ease without feeling insecure, to overcome their own prejudices, and for the police to stop coming with battalions, because they will understand that, ultimately, when you rap, you don't throw Molotov cocktails. And the municipal authorities are continuing to provide financial support, because they know that it meets expectations, that there's a culture, that the city is now promoting a culture that exists in Herstal, that has always existed but never had its place, the place it deserved, but now it's valued. And these young people are valued.

Coming back to "Another Don Juan," this participant observation of part of the project's institutional implementation appears interesting for the chronological analysis, as it allows highlighting the implementation of a sociocultural project that meets the demands of both the Youth Sector and the artists involved. The latter were able to get involved in the project under professional conditions and learn in this context, while being considered as artists in their own right. Nevertheless, this required them to negotiate with representatives of the Youth Sector involved beforehand, so as not to feel instrumentalized and categorized by and within codes in which they did not want to confine their rap music practice. The same observations can be made about the Herstal Urban Festival, whose basic approach rests precisely on the need to build the project from the outset with the hip hop artists involved and based on their own demands. Having spoken informally with several artists who have played at and/or participated in the organization of this annual festival or other editions of it, I can attest to their satisfaction with it.

In addition, mobilizing the street-level bureaucracy model allows me to better evaluate my own involvement in the YCF. My main purpose when I joined the organization was not to work for

[247] See *City of Herstal* (2020), "Herstal Urban Festival 2019."
[248] See *City of Herstal* (2020), "Herstal Urban Festival 2019" (starting from 1:05).

the Youth Sector, but rather for and with hip hop—on one hand, from a cultural and artistic point of view, on the other, as part of my thesis work. Within the substantial discretion available to me, I therefore worked mainly on projects that involved hip hop in their implementation, in a way that suited me or that I was trying to orientate in such a way. I did this, of course, in compliance with the main principles established by the 2000, 2003, and 2009 Decrees. Actually, it was largely thanks to my experience in hip hop, linked to sociopolitical issues, that the YCF board of directors decided to hire me. Thus, in retrospect, I consider that I behaved within the YCF in a way that could be described as a kind of "hip hop" street-level bureaucrat of the youth cultural policy in Francophone Belgium.[249]

The cases of MAS at the YC Thier-à-Liège and Nectar show how substantial discretion and implementation tricks from various street-level bureaucrats can give a critical role to these implementing agents and the possibility for them to have concrete influence and responsibility in youth cultural policymaking. The institutional recognition of hip hop by the youth cultural policy in Francophone Belgium owes then much from field practices by implementing agents trying to use it for public action. Similarly, underlying the importance of inter-individual relations in the building of the substantial discretion of these implementing agents identifies clues about how hip hop artists may negotiate the practice of their arts and their own career objectives and professional progression with and within this particular public policy framework. These various strategies must be considered in a context of hip hop and rap music having been somewhat confined to institutionalized sociocultural action, while artists aspired to professionalization and full recognition of their art in line with any other artistic practices in Francophone Belgium.

Speaking more generally about the state of the recognition and evolution of hip hop culture and rap music in Francophone Belgium, AMB'N and Nectar both highlighted that the notion of "urban cultures" could contribute to it: "It's no longer rap for me, it's urban culture" (AMB'N 2018: n.p.). AMB'N (ibid.) made the connection with issues relating to the evolution of popular and globalized music forms:

[249] Soon after I left the YCF, I had the opportunity to write two educational booklets on hip hop, the first in broad terms, the second in connection with "hip hop pedagogy" and the Youth Sector in Francophone Belgium (Gossiaux 2018a; 2018b). It was commissioned by the CDGAI (Center for Group Dynamics and Institutional Analysis), a lifelong education not-for-profit organization dedicated to group trainings for actors in the fields of culture, animation, education, teaching, training, social work, psychosocial support, and institutional management. Its publications and training offers are directed primarily to these audiences, but also to any interested public.

> It's part of the evolution of the thing. All the great musical movements have gone through this phase where you get to a point and you say: 'Okay, we're at a crossroads here, either we walk together, or we decide to create genres, sub-genres, sub-sub-genres, styles, things.' And for me, this is where rap is nowadays […] It's normal, music evolves, it's not a dead sound, it's like a living language, you know. Every day you invent new things.

As Fonix (2018: n.p.) highlighted: "We realize that urban culture is no longer a neighborhood thing, it's something that transcends all borders [...] everyone needs culture, and when you go and do it in a closed center [of the immigration policy in Belgium] or a prison, you're super useful."

The findings concerning the use of hip hop by the sociocultural public action aimed at young people in Francophone Belgium can thus be finalized in the frame of this research, before returning to it for the conclusions. The next chapter closes the analysis of the corpus of songs and configurations of the art world in which they are created. Before that, I should say that after my first encounter with AMB'N in 2017 and two collaborations in 2018 (producing a song and a live performance for the closing concert of a YCF project), I officially joined the group/collective as DJ, mixer, and composer/beatmaker in 2019 following our participation at the Franc'Off, a music competition organized as part of the music festival *Les Francofolies de Spa*. As Hopium Beatz and I already had mutual connections due to the Under Tha Bridge/Fragn's Bridge and Liège's Art-Mur and Division Ruina collectives, he advised AMB'N to ask me to become their resident DJ. I immediately accepted.

Chapter 12

Rap music and the collective memories of racial discrimination in contemporary postcolonial Francophone Belgium

Before starting the empirical analysis, it is worth clarifying a methodological point concerning the corpus selection. Given the evolution of the Francophone Belgian rap music art world, and the entrenched presence of hip hop in the country at the end of the 2000s, with the integration of digital tools and the beginning of the emergence of a new generation of artists, there is not enough space in this research to attempt a global analysis of the general conventions of Francophone Belgian rap beginning around 2010. Therefore, the empirical selection of the corpus of songs for this part was made in a more selective way, to retain only the data related to racism and racialization, postcolonial experiences, decolonization and related matters. This does not imply that every rap song produced and released in Brussels or Liège between 2008–2021 that deals with these themes has been identified and/or retained in this manuscript. Additionally, the analysis of this part makes an exception to its chronological division by starting with a project released in 2007, given its content.

Considering the evolution of the art world of Francophone Belgian rap from around 2010, this chapter addresses both questions relating to the commodification and integration of rap into a music industry and those relating to the types of artistic mobilization against racism that can be identified.

Section 1

Challenging racism and the dominant postcolonial narrative with hip hop culture and rap music

Following his departure from Starflam in 2004,[250] Baloji released his first solo album, *Hotel Impala* [*Impala Hotel*], in 2007. The project is a kind of musical autobiography built on rap and hip hop, R&B, reggae, soul, afrobeat, and spirituals. The *Hotel Impala* story begins in 2005 when Baloji received a letter from his biological mother, living in Lubumbashi, the second most important city in DRC after the capital Kinshasa. Baloji had been sent to Belgium by his father

[250] Following the release of Starflam's third album, *Donne moi de l'amour* [*Give Me Love*], in 2003, Baloji announced his departure from the group after having honored his scheduled concert dates. He explained in a 2007 interview that his decision had been taken before the release of this last Starflam album. The collective continued to tour until 2009, before taking a break to focus on the solo projects of some of its members (*IDLM* 2024b).

at the age of four to live in Europe with his uncle and aunt, without his mother knowing about it. This situation cut him off from contact with her: "When I received a letter from her in November 2005, I fell apart [...] She'd seen me on TV on MCM Africa.[251] I'd erased it and put it on an external hard drive. I discovered that I was a year younger, and that my father had taken me away without telling her" (in Binet 2008: n.p.). The biographical journey of *Hotel Impala* is then articulated around the return of Baloji to his birth country after 25 years. The album's title refers to the hotel that Baloji's father owned in Kolwezi in DRC (relatively close to Lubumbashi).

Hotel Impala was distributed by the famous French label Hostile Records,[252] a division of EMI, which already distributed *Survivant* by Starflam. The lead single was "*Tout ceci ne vous rendra pas le Congo*" ["All This Will Not Give You Back the Congo"]. The full version of "*Tout ceci ne vous rendra pas le Congo*" (also distributed in edited form as a single) starts with the introductory song on the album (called "Intro") and ends with a Congolese rumba musical sequence introduced by Baloji and featuring other Congolese singers. The album version is the same as the full single version without the introduction, and the short/edited single version is the one featured in the music video (see below). For the purposes of this analysis, I consider the full version of the song, which features Dieudonné Kabongo[253] on the intro and outro.

The title of the song is self-explanatory, tackling Belgian colonial history directly and being a well-known reference in Francophone Belgium. Indeed, *Tout ça (ne nous rendra pas le Congo)* ["All This (Will Not Give Us Back the Congo)"], is a Belgian TV show created in 2002[254] by Jean Libon and Marco Lamensch, broadcast on La Une, the television channel of the RTBF. The aim of this program is to immerse viewers in the world of real-life documentaries regarding Belgian society and people living in Belgium. The show is very well known in Francophone Belgium (and now also in France), mainly for the authenticity of its content. Baloji has thus hijacked the show's title, already ironic, to counterpoint it and denounce Belgian colonialism.

[251] Created in 1994, this television channel, now called Trace Urban, is a French pay-TV music video television channel and is the third most distributed French television channel in the world, dedicated to urban contemporary music and cultures. It is one of the most watched music channels in sub-Saharan Africa.

[252] Following Universal Music's takeover of EMI in 2013 (before Sony acquired a majority stake in 2018), Hostile was shut down and merged with another historic EMI division, the British label Parlophone.

[253] Dieudonné Kabongo was a Belgian actor, storyteller, and musician of Congolese origin who settled in Belgium in 1970 and died on stage in 2011 at the Jette cultural center. He is often referred to as "the first African humorist to settle in Belgium" (*Africultures* 2024: n.p.).

[254] The first version of this show was called *Strip-tease* and was created by the same directors. Its slogan was: "Strip-tease: the show that undresses you."

The song begins with Dieudonné Kabongo saying, "*Welcome to the Impala Hotel*," before Baloji says: "*Back to the starting point/ As if at the point of no return/ Well-stocked autobiography of a lifetime/ Impala Hotel first volume/ From Lubumbashi to Liège/ Baloji [x3]/ OK, listen to me [x3]."* Baloji declaims then his lyrics, in which he is adopting a narrator's stance and not necessarily relating his own story. He recalls some (geo)political events in the Congo (called "Zaïre" at the time) during the 1980s and early 1990s, with rebel forces opposing those of Mobutu Sese Seko's regime (backed by Belgium, France, and Morocco) in a context of controlling mining resources and hostage-taking of European nationals (e.g., the battle of Kolwezi). This narrative allows Baloji to outline certain of the main reasons that drove many Congolese people to leave their country and seek refuge in Belgium during this era.

At the end of this introductory part, the following lyrics can be quoted: "*I'll come to your home as soon as my documents are in order/ [Patrice] Lumumba t-shirt and make them forget Che [Guevara]/ I dream of playing Lotto [i.e., national lottery], drinking this beer […]/ Visit your Matonge, Ixelles roadway.*" These lines contain several references that are interesting to highlight here. The first are Patrice Lumumba and Che Guevara. A major figure in the Congolese independence movement and a pan-Africanist and socialist thinker, Lumumba became the first prime minister of Congo a few days before official independence on June 30, 1960. During the "Congo Crisis," he was removed from the government by Joseph Kasa-Vubu (another important figure in Congolese independence) after three months. He was then arrested and assassinated by the Congolese army in Katanga on January 17, 1961, in the presence of Belgian soldiers. The army was controlled by Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, with a strong Belgian diplomatic influence, who will be later known as Mobutu Sese Seko, taking power following a coup in 1965 to become the president of Congo until 1997.

These events and history, as well as the ongoing fight against neocolonialism, have contributed to make Lumumba one of the main inspirations and symbols of pan-Africanism and anti-imperialist and decolonial struggles. The speech he gave on June 30, 1960, at the *Palais de la Nation*[255] (Palace of the Nation) has gone down in the history of these struggles for denouncing the reality of colonization that Belgium tried to hide with its so-called civilizing mission. In 2002, following a parliamentary inquiry by the Belgian House of Representatives,[256] Belgium

[255] See "Speech at the Ceremony of the Proclamation of the Congo's Independence, June 30, 1960."

[256] This commission aimed to "determine the exact circumstances of Patrice Lumumba's assassination and the possible involvement of Belgian political leaders in it."

formally apologized for its role in the assassination of Lumumba (he was shot, before his body was cut up and dissolved in acid with the help of Belgian intelligence agents). This execution is now documented as a political crime, since Lumumba embodied the opposite of Belgium's interests at the time (Urban.Brussels 2022: 19). In 2022, Belgium returned a tooth of Lumumba to his family, as remains.[257]

Ernesto "Che" Guevara was a Marxist revolutionary of Argentinean origin who dedicated his life to the struggle for social justice and the independence of peoples, starting with Cuba. For example, in 1965, he travelled to the Congo to support opponents of Mobutu and colonial and imperialist powers such as Belgium, France, and the US. Like Lumumba, he has become a global symbol of the struggle for social justice, independence, and self-determination of oppressed peoples. Unfortunately for Guevara's ideological commitment, global capitalism has succeeded in turning him into a kind of logo for various products and marketing purposes, dedicated firstly to people claiming to be leftists. The best-known of these products are t-shirts with a very famous 1960 photo portrait of Che Guevara, called "*Guerrillero Heroico*" and taken by Alberto Korda, the personal photographer of Fidel Castro, the other leading figure in the Cuban revolution of the 1950s along with Guevara.

Baloji's reference to these two revolutionary and pro-independence icons signifies his desire to give greater visibility to the path of Lumumba, a figure who seems less well-known in Belgium than Che Guevara, despite being an integral part of Belgian history. This can be explained by the Belgian colonial period not being systematically and structurally taught in Belgian schools. However, as explained in Part 1, since George Floyd's death, lines are slowly beginning to move in Belgium regarding the collective memory of colonialism and increasing numbers of people and initiatives are calling for an end to Belgium's glorification of colonialism and for the debunking of its colonial propaganda artefacts (Gossiaux and Martiniello 2025).

For example, speaking of public space decolonization, Lumumba has inspired a multitude of initiatives in Belgium, and a "Patrice Lumumba Square" located at the entrance to the Matonge district was officially inaugurated in 2018 "in a desire by the City of Brussels to decolonize public space" (City of Brussels 2022: 4). However, even though an explanatory panel on the life of Lumumba has been placed on the square, it is regrettable that this square is in reality a

[257] This tooth was extracted and kept for decades by Gérard Soete (also known under the author's pseudonym Geert Van Puthen), a Belgian colonial gendarme who took part in the execution of Lumumba.

"no man's land" located next to a motorway, i.e., a place of passage only, with no urban architectural installations for pedestrians.[258] The same year, the city of Charleroi inaugurated the first street named after Patrice Lumumba in Belgium (Urban.Brussels 2022: 26). "Patrice Lumumba Square" is then intended to counter the narrative of statues, monuments, and public street and places names glorifying Belgian colonization. Contestation of the presence of such colonial monuments in Belgian public space has risen since the early 2000s, and seems to be slowly gaining more impact, or at least visibility, particularly since 2020 (Clette-Gakuba and Vander Elst 2018).

One Brussels-based collective that is very active on issues of decolonization of public space is the *Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte contre les Discriminations* [Colonial Memory and Anti-Discrimination Collective] (hereafter CMCLD). CMCLD gathers several not-for-profit organizations and collectives and organizes a range of activities (conferences, training courses, commemorations, events), including guided tours of different parts of Brussels with the aim of decolonizing public space by deconstructing colonial propaganda through direct and interactive action. During an interview with Aliou Baldé in 2023, responsible for the public space department at CMCLD, he explained that

> the basic idea [at the foundation of CMCLD] was to make a connection between Belgian colonization and racism. […] often one spoke about racism in Belgium, and to specify negrophobia, without anchoring it in a particular historical context [...] However, racism is well anchored in Belgium and has a history in Belgium specific to Belgium. So the idea of our association, of our militant organization, was to make the thing obvious for people.

When I asked him if hip hop culture and rap music could be of any use to his work, he explained that, as a fan of rap music himself, he assumed that young people would understand his message better if it came through references with which they were familiar:

> This question of art and music is fundamental to our way of resisting. For example, when I do visits for young people in technical and vocational training, and often the young people we put in these stories are young blacks and Arabs, Arabs generally from the Maghreb, many of the references I use are rappers they know. Like Booba, for example. Booba, we don't agree on a

[258] See City of Brussels (2018), "Inauguration du square Patrice Lumumba." A call for artistic projects published by the City of Brussels in 2022 aimed to continue the decolonizing public space by installing on Lumumba Square "a temporary and permanent artistic expression: installation, performance, exhibition, sculpture, etc." (City of Brussels 2022: 5).

> lot of what he does, but he's been very political in his choices. Or rappers like Kery James, or Youssoupha (CMCLD 2023: n.p.).

In a postcolonial context, the symbolism of Lumumba's independence struggle appears to be used by various people to claim and concretize a change in Belgium's attitude towards its colonial history, as in the case of Baloji, who metaphorically evokes the arrival in Belgium of a Congolese national proudly wearing a t-shirt bearing the image of Lumumba, in the same way as other key anti-imperialist figures, such as Che Guevara.

Still as narrator, Baloji then refers to the "Lotto," Belgium's national lottery, an institution dependent on the Ministry of Finance and subject to direct control by the federal government. This institution was created in 1934 by the Ministry of Colonies, which was responsible for administering Belgian colonies, under the name "Colonial Lottery." In a context of global economic crisis leading to budgetary difficulties for Belgium's government, the Ministry of Colonies decided to organize this lottery, with part of the winnings going back into the colonial administration budget. The massive publicity campaign for the first colonial lottery, with posters all over the country, radio spots, and a whole range of merchandising products, was built around a bogus "social goal" supposed to improve the living conditions of the colonized populations.[259] The advertising campaign was a huge success, and 300,000 copies of a board game were even printed. The game depicts the journey of a "colonial hero" in the Belgian Congo as he tries to make a fortune from its wealth and resources. This lottery and the advertising campaign that accompanied it thus generated an extremely abundant production of images to serve the objectives of colonial propaganda (e.g., dehumanization of the colonized people, so-called civilizing mission or at least social assistance,[260] the promise of personal enrichment for the colonialists, etc.) (M'Bokolo 2004). After the political independence of the Belgian colonies in the early 1960s, the Colonial Lottery was renamed the National Lottery. It is in this context that Baloji's reference to "Lotto" can be understood in the framework of his narrative on the state of mind of a native Congolese arriving in Belgium at the end of the 1980s.

The same narrative explains the reference to the Matonge district in the municipality of Ixelles in Brussels. Since the colonial period, this neighborhood, near the Royal Palace of Brussels,[261]

[259] See *Loterie Nationale* (2024), "L'histoire de la Loterie Nationale : les origines de la loterie."

[260] This idea of social concern is similar to the speeches of certain people or organizations called "humanitarian."

[261] The official palace of the King and Queen of the Belgians. Not their official residence, it is rather the place where the King exercises the prerogatives of Head of State as defined in the Belgian constitution.

has been home to many colonial associations (associations promoting and glorifying colonization). After the 1960s independence of Burundi, Congo, and Rwanda, increasing numbers of students and future diplomats from newly independent countries and from other sub-Saharan countries came to Belgium, not necessarily to settle there permanently. The rich and varied associative commitment of these students bore witness to the significant cultural, religious, national, and linguistic diversity in sub-Saharan Africa and the district became progressively a commercial center and meeting place for sub-Saharan Africans and Afrodescendents (particularly from Congolese origins) in Belgium. Starting from the 1980s, the neighborhood was called Matonge, after a district in Kinshasa. It was also at this time that some asylum seekers from Burundi, Congo, and Rwanda came to settle in Belgium, fleeing wars, genocides, and social and economic misery. The activism and militant commitment of some of these people was therefore concentrated in Matonge in the 1980s and 1990s, before gradually spreading to other Brussels locations from the 2000s onwards, showing a multiplication and diversification of the migratory trajectories of these populations in Belgium (Kagné and Martiniello 2001). The sociopolitical context allowed for the development of various initiatives and platforms based on pan-Africanism and the emergence of "associative" spokespersons working for the recognition of the sub-Saharan African diasporas in Belgium by the public authorities in the same way as other immigrant populations. Later, this associative landscape would expand to include new issues related to the descendants of these immigrant populations, struggling for full citizenship in the country of their birth (Ndiaye 2004; Grégoire and Mazzocchetti 2013).

Matonge is often referred to as the "African" district of Brussels, and various guided tours and walks have been organized since the 1990s. Some of these initiatives were criticized for their "exoticizing approach, to the point where black shopkeepers and passers-by in the neighborhood (contrary to what most visitors think, very few sub-Saharan Africans live in Matonge) felt observed like monkeys in a zoo" (Urban.Brussels 2022: 17). People committed to recognizing the district's political and cultural history then organized other initiatives, while campaigning to ensure that this history was not misrepresented and that the interest aroused by the Matonge district served its merchants and inhabitants first.

Early in 2018, a few months after officially beginning my doctoral program, I conducted a dozen semi-structured interviews with activists and resource persons with expertise in the cultural associative sector in Brussels of sub-Saharan descent about the contribution of people

from former colonies and sub-Saharan African countries to Belgium's cultural, artistic, and intellectual spheres. This work was part of a research project aimed at drafting a founding charter and giving concrete form to the first stages of implementation for a future cultural center dedicated to sub-Saharan African Cultures in Belgium (see below). I also carried out a series of passive and participatory observations of cultural and associative events with the same panel profile. One of these observations involved passive attendance at a cultural event organized at the Théâtre Molière, in a shopping mall in Matonge, called "Brussels, African City."[262] Organized as part of an itinerant festival called "Made in Bruxsel: Migrations that create the city,"[263] the event brought together academic, associative, artistic, and other people interested in cultural matters though speeches, debates, music, and documentaries, speaking about racial discrimination and their links with the colonial period, disadvantaged groups, the use of migrant people as scapegoats for the problems of Belgian society, and other related matters such as multiculturalism and the management of multiple and mixed cultural identities by Brussels' political authorities.[264] This event, organized in Matonge itself, highlighted the importance of this district as a symbolic historical site of certain postcolonial experiences in Belgium. During one of the evening's debates, I heard the following comment from two audience members next to me: "They took from us the gold and diamonds and gave us Matonge." Beyond the irony of this statement lies a distinct analytical perspective that highlights the injustices faced by colonized populations and their descendants as a result of Belgian colonization.

Going back to Baloji's song "*Tout ceci ne vous rendra pas le Congo*," the chorus is quite explicit in its analysis of the colonial period:

Even if the West take the blame [in French: Même si l'Occident a bon dos]/ It will not give you back the Congo
Plundering our minerals, our ingots/ It will not give you back the Congo
And reproducing colonial patterns/ It will not give you back the Congo
Because terror seen from here is like the Earth seen from the sky/ It seems far from us, it seems unreal

This chorus allows the rapper to look back at Belgium's colonial period, while making links between this period and the current situation. He denounces practices and forms of

[262] See *Muziekpublique* (2018), "Made in Bruxsel Festival#6 Brussels, African City."
[263] See *Made in Bruxsel* (2018), "À propos."
[264] For example, see *CBAI* (2019), "'Bruxelles, Ville d'Afrique' - Made In Bruxsel Festival - CBAI et BA."

neocolonialism and the persistence of colonial patterns ("plundering our minerals, our ingots," "reproducing colonial patterns"), while remaining critical of the responsibilities, complacency, and corruption of certain sub-Saharan African politicians, past and present[265] ("even if the West take the blame"). The second verse explicitly returns to the chorus' main theme:

The children of the Liberation don't play Indians/ They see Europe as the Wild West in vain and for nothing
Waiting for their Western Union check/ Dreaming of robbing a delegation
Say the country's in transition, the war's an escalation/ For this ideal, go to the Marshall Plan
The Marshal's reign left it wobbly/ And say the UNESCO only helps postcard countries
Instead of taking care of current affairs/ Because a third of the country is without power or running water
Ethnic wars reinforce the status quo/ Congo is a Stratego playground
All its neighboring countries have become rivals/ In the plundering of its minerals, its ingots
The country's under control/ And it's worse than in Leopold's time
Between the law of the jungle and the law of protocol/ The revolution needs volunteers
And as long as public opinion abdicates/ The Congolese remains the nigger of Africa

The first two lines deal with the post-independence situation of Congolese youth, comparing them to cowboys (the latter a mythologized element of Western American culture, representing freedom and independence), whose preferred territory would be Europe. The rapper's point is that these young people would rather leave their homeland to find better living conditions elsewhere than stay and defend it against invaders, in the image of certain Native American populations who defended themselves against cowboys or the army. In the same vein, Baloji refers to the international money transfer company Western Union, well known to the African diaspora and populations on the continent as some people regularly receive money from family members working in Europe. More specifically on the theme of development, the artist mentions the Marshall Plan,[266] Marshal Mobutu,[267] and UNESCO.[268] The aim is to highlight the catastrophic situation of the DRC in terms of international development standards for access

[265] Active participation in the slave trade, monopolization of natural resources to serve the interests of a few rather than a whole population, labor exploitation, disregard for the human rights of populations, etc.
[266] Since the early 2000s, several initiatives have been launched to set up a development program in the DRC inspired by the "Marshall Plan" (see *Jeune Afrique*).
[267] In 1982, Mobutu established a one-party regime and proclaimed himself "Marshal-President."
[268] The mention of UNESCO allows Baloji to denounce certain shortcomings of so-called development cooperation policies, notably the search for private funds to maintain the activity of certain organizations involved in this policy area.

to basic needs (housing, electricity, running water, etc.). The rapper evokes the so-called "ethnic conflicts" and the internationalization of these conflicts in the regions of Central and East Africa, to denounce the supposed interference of certain countries neighboring Congo, especially to monopolize its natural resources. He concludes his verse by explicitly returning to the period of colonization to declare that, in his opinion, the situation in the Congo at the beginning of the 21st century is worse than during the colonial period. He puts "the law of the jungle" and what he calls "the law of protocols" into perspective to underline the failure of the Congolese state and its representatives, while calling for a popular revolution to end the exploitation of this population, whom he compares to "niggers" or "negroes", i.e., people considered to be at the lowest rung of the human ladder, almost like animals, whose existence would have no meaning other than to be exploited by others.

The beginning of the third verse is in the same vein and seems to address the Congolese people directly, denouncing the fractures in the Congolese population and certain neocolonial practices: "*All full-fledged Congolese, all related/ Let's put our differences aside, we've got a country to rebuild/ While viruses give themselves away like flyers/ New missionaries make their Emmaüs*."[269] The end of the same verse sums up Baloji's messages on these themes: "*Our development is at a standstill like the Gécamines/ Complexed by our melanin level/ Integration will come through money/ But determination remains the determining factor*." The rapper compares the situation of the Gécamines[270] since the 2000s, plagued by economic difficulties linked to corruption and mismanagement, with that of the general development of the Congolese state and its population. He then highlights the persistent colonial alienation of this people, who would seem to be complexed by their skin color, following the spread of racist ideology to justify the colonial project. Finally, he evokes the theme of integration to underline the importance of a person's individual financial capital in this process. The idea seems to be that money facilitates integration, as it would contribute to deconstruct certain stereotypes and racist prejudices.

[269] Emmaüs International is an organization present in over 40 countries, including the DRC, fighting poverty, exclusion and promoting human rights. The organization was founded by French Abbé Pierre (Henry Grouès) and was initially inspired by Christianity. Following the revelation of accusations of sexual violence committed by Henri Grouès in the context of his religious functions, the Emmaüs Federation in Switzerland has announced that it no longer wishes to use the name and image of the Abbé Pierre.

[270] The Gécamines (*La Générale des Carrières et des Mines*) is a private company owned exclusively by the Congolese state. The company's history dates back to the very first expeditions by European colonialists to the Katanga region at the end of the 18th century. Leopold II's desire to establish a colony in the region in the following century was directly linked to its immeasurable mineral resources. In 1906, Belgian colonizers created the Mining Union of Upper-Katanga (*L'Union Minière du Haut-Katanga*), the ancestor of the Gécamines.

The music video for "*Tout ceci ne vous rendra pas le Congo*" was entirely shot in the DRC, in Baloji's native Lubumbashi. The artist can be seen strolling through the streets and public spaces (stadium, school, stall, church, shop) while rapping his verse, interspersed with shots of Congolese people of all ages and occupations. Throughout, elements of Congolese folklore are featured (musical and dancing fanfare, dancers in traditional dress). Baloji adopts a variety of clothing styles, and in one scene we see him wearing a t-shirt, which he shows to the camera, mimicking the attitude of someone shouting. The t-shirt reads "African negro," a reference to the lyrics at the end of the song's second verse. In another scene, we see him surrounded by people who seem to be linked to a hip hop movement, and we also see a ghetto-blaster. This is the only black-and-white scene in the video, certainly to emphasize its old-school hip hop feel and recall the artist's first musical path with Starflam.

In an unsourced interview, Baloji explains that he stayed in the city for a week, to shoot the video and to meet his biological mother: "It definitely put me in my place to discover the Congolese reality, my mother's reality. It was a personal and cultural shock. There's an incredible energy over there."[271] Indeed, the song speaks finally of a kind of Afropean identity, putting Baloji's experiences as a sub-Saharan African immigrant in Europe facing racism and discrimination into perspective with his knowledge and rediscovery of his home region in Central Africa. This introductory song is therefore the foundation of the album, setting out most of the major themes to be addressed. Nevertheless, the artist explains in a 2023 interview that he is no longer as attached to this notion: "I have come back a bit from that appellation. Because people always try to put us in boxes" (in Zacharie 2023: n.p.).

"*Repris de justesse*" ["Outlaw"][272] is structured around Baloji's experience as a person feeling discriminated against in Belgium due to his situation as an undocumented immigrant seeking to settle there. The first verse begins:

Okay, yo, this verse is cut from skin and blood/ To seal my fate as an immigrant [in French: "ressortissant"]
Since our rights here are banished/ Since they hunt us like in Mississippi
Surrounded by circulars and forms/ Security withdrawal, banana republic but
Double pain is double work/ Their double games left me no choice […]

[271] See *Genius*, "Tout ceci ne vous rendra pas le Congo [Lyrics]."
[272] In French, the title of the song is a word play using a formulation synonym of "Outlaw."

I'm a foreigner on both sides of the border

The song begins thus by denouncing the violation of certain rights among migrants, drawing a parallel with the situation of slaves deported from sub-Saharan Africa to Mississippi in the 19th century. Baloji evokes a certain form of withdrawal seen in multicultural European societies since the 1990s and refers also to the bankrupt nature of certain states in sub-Saharan Africa, which reinforces the difficulty of his situation as an immigrant, given that he can find stability neither in Belgium nor in the DRC.

Verses two and three return to certain elements specific to Belgium in relation to the experience of immigration: "*In the capital, we live under the cloak/ Confusing a church with a little castle/ They say we're free and equal/ But the reality is far from this robot portrait [...]/ I'm not from the Emirates, beyond the quota/ To end up like Semira in this case*." In these lyrics from verse two, the line mentioning "a little castle" indicates the Belgium's largest and oldest "arrival center" for asylum seekers, called "*Petit-Château*," in the center of Brussels.[273] The reference to the Emirates then allowed the rapper to denounce a kind of double standard in the processing of residency applications in Belgium, as a wealthy immigrant would be treated better and would have a much greater chance of being accepted as a resident in Belgium. This recalls a line from the track analyzed above when Baloji raps that "*integration will come through money*." He parallels this with the death of Semira Adamu (see Chapter 8).

In the third verse, referring to his incarceration in a closed center, he states:

I want to answer, he tells me: 'Shut your mouth/ We're taking you back to where you came from, you dirty nigger [in French: "sale bougnoul"]'*
But it's only when I get to the center that I collapse [...]/ I'm a prisoner they call a resident
And the hacks here are nursing aides/ But the system is sick, but I remain lucid
Because their decrees have the effect of a pesticide/ To keep us on the sidelines or behind the line [...]
Our pro-deo[274] are ill-informed

[273] It opened in 1986 as a "reception center," before becoming an "arrival center" in 2018. It is managed by Fedasil, a Belgian federal agency, under the supervision of the Secretary of State or Minister for Asylum and Immigration. The center is responsible for receiving and registering applications for international protection in relation to asylum procedures (see *Fedasil*, "Bruxelles (Petit-Château)").

[274] Refers to lawyers paid totally or partly with legal aid aimed to assist people on low incomes.

In 2001, after the commercial success of "*La sonora*" and the album *Survivant* (a success that probably brought him to the attention of some administrative authorities), Baloji received a notice of expulsion from the Belgian territory and would be confined for 45 days in the Vottem closed center, in the Liège region. He explains in a 2023 interview:

> I've been confronted with structural racism all my life, but here I discovered administrative racism: blind rules, paperwork, it was all very mathematical. 'You've been in the country for this many days, you can stay in a closed center for this many days, you're entitled to a pro deo for this many hours, you have to leave the country in this many days'. I wasn't asked any questions about my life. […] My relationship with Belgium is influenced by all this, by the order to leave the country, by the refusal of funding [for filmmaking], but also by the fact that it has enabled me to pursue an artistic career, to have a passport and to travel the world (in Zacharie 2023: n.p.).

At the beginning of the interview, he explains: "I was almost expelled from Belgium in 2001. And last May [2023], I found myself the only filmmaker representing Belgium at [the Cannes Film Festival] – and thus contributing to a logic of soft power. It's a strange, almost schizophrenic feeling."[275] He then returns to the issue of immigration: "Why do so few people from immigrant backgrounds find their place? The reality is that this society constantly reminds us that we are barely just admitted" (ibid.). These thoughts can then be compared with the chorus of "*Repris de justesse*": "*It's the sound of the just taken back/ They know it, they know it/ The promised land doesn't keep its promises/ And I'm dying, and I'm dying/ [x2]/ As soon as we arrive, we're defendants/ If you don't know, because it's planned*."

In "*Liège-Bruxelles-Gand*" ["Liège-Brussels-Ghent"], Baloji, living in Ghent nowadays, talks about the three Belgian cities he knows best. The artist looks back on his adolescence in Liège: "*My starting point, my place to stay/ Liège contains me, brings me closer to my goal/ My starting point, my place to stay/ Liège*." He then raps:

Like the Italians before us, racism offloads itself/ We're the only negroes in this bourgeois neighborhood
They call it positive discrimination/ But at the time, it was an exception, an archive fact
Liège, my little Sicily, where the horizon hides behind slag heaps/ But the nonnos [i.e., grandfathers, forefathers, in Italian] *have a blood complexion, dimples in their palms*
The new generation has been surprised/ Wherever I go, it's Liège I leave behind

[275] Baloji presented a movie he realized called *Augure* at the 2023 Cannes Film Festival.

Liège is snowing with aluminum flakes/ Under the noses of elected officials, the heroin follows its added value

In our capital, useless works/ Stewards think they're plainclothes cops

State subsidiaries go to the opera that turns privileges around/ While youth clubs replace secondary schools

These lyrics offer an insight into Baloji's adolescence in Liège. He lived initially in the mainly bourgeois district of Cointe in the hills above the city, before moving to Droixhe, a working-class neighborhood. There, he began hanging out on the streets with Italian and Sicilian communities living in Droixhe, settled following the bilateral agreements with Belgium after World War II. Having lived alongside these communities, he recalls the racism and racial discrimination to which they were also subjected when they arrived and settled in Belgium. He also refers to the work in coal mines for which these people came to Belgium when speaking of "blood complexion" (after a workday in the coal mines, workers left the site with their heads and clothes covered in soot) and "dimples in their palms" (the very hard work in the mines required wielding pickaxes and other massive tools leaving visible after-effects and several illnesses). Rapping then "*Liège is snowing with aluminum flakes*," Baloji reformulates a metaphor he had used in the 2001 song "*Péril urbain*" with Starflam to talk about the problems of drug addiction and drug circulation in Liège, and the inability of elected politicians to solve them. The last line of the extract deals with cultural policies in Francophone Belgium, criticizing their orientations for drawing a line between certain artistic and cultural practices that are recognized as professional and treated as such (in the state-subsidized "cultural" sector), while others are used for social purposes that are supposed to contribute to the fight against inequalities (in the state-subsidized "sociocultural" sector).

"*Ostende transit*" pays tribute to another Belgian city familiar to Baloji. Ostend is the first town in Belgium where he stayed when he arrived from the DRC with his father. The choice of this city can be understood in the light of the career of American soul icon Marvin Gaye,[276] whose music Baloji's biological mother loved. The title of the song is taken from a 1989 documentary by Belgian filmmaker Richard Olivier, called *Marvin Gaye Transit Ostende*, which tells the story of Marvin Gaye's "exile" in Ostend. The lyrics of the song are therefore directly linked to this context, as shown in the following extract:

[276] Following professional and personal problems, Marvin Gaye went to Ostend in 1981 and stayed almost two years.

The thread of life strangles me/ I've forgotten my country and my language
As the years have gone by/ But when she [i.e., Baloji's biological mother] saw me on a cable channel
She also said to herself that he [i.e., Baloji's father] kept his word/ By educating me, by putting me in school
In her idol's land of asylum

As Baloji (in Bossavie 2018: n.p.) later explained:

> I've said it in lots of interviews but it's sadly true, my mother said to me: 'Your father told me he was taking you to Marvin Gaye country.' Yes, that's true, but the reality is that Marvin Gaye was in Ostend for detoxification. There was nothing glamorous about it. […] And when I came across his track 'I'm Going Home,' I had the idea of making the album in sequence. I went to take it to my mother, but nothing went according to plan. The return to the Congo was hard, I got a slap in the face.

Speaking about the artistic approach of the album, Baloji explains that he wanted to work with various musicians on the project: "I was very influenced by Kanye West, Jay-Z, sounds like that, very soulful, and I wanted to go towards that sound and get closer to that thing. I listened a lot to Curtis Mayfield, especially his first album *Curtis*, and that's what I built the record around." The song "*Ostende transit*" is a good example of Baloji's general approach to *Impala Hotel*. Inspired by some of the great names in black music, he also wanted to tell a story, his own, by creating the music himself to enable him to do so. This song is also a good example of intercultural circulation through the record, where an artist from rap music and hip hop culture is inspired by an American soul music icon to create a soul song. As he explains in the 2023 interview about his film *Augure*: "I'm showing my heritage, my culture, which is linked to two countries, two continents, but which is also Walloon and Flemish and steeped in Italian cinema, Latin American magic realism and Anglo-Saxon music. My career is linked to all these places, all these cultures... I don't fit into one box..." (in Zacharie 2023: n.p.). In another interview he explained:

> I want to make music that is very African and very modern. You have to be proud of who you are. You can sample Bob James or Curtis Mayfield, but it means more when Talib Kweli or Kanye West sample them because that's their heritage. But we Africans also have an interesting heritage, which has richness and a diversity that is huge and under-exploited. We can also go deep into it and make it modern, celebrate its value, just like the Americans (in Morgan 2011: n.p.).

The album cover is representative of this approach. Baloji's face is drawn as a patchwork assembled in a single color palette with different variations, probably to signify his multiple identities and cultural affiliations. Nevertheless, such an artistic approach does not always seem to meet the interests of certain key actors in the music industry. For example, according to Baloji, EMI refused to release his second solo album in 2010, *Kinshasa Succursale*,[277] arguing it was "too much community-oriented": "No matter what I do, one will always [be] sent back to my box" (in Morgan 2011: n.p.). A few years later, answering a question about potential parallels between his music and Marvin Gaye, Baloji gave more details about the reception of *Impala Hotel* at the time at the label:

> Yes, except that as it didn't make any money, it was really commercial suicide for them, otherwise I would have followed it up quicker. I was told by EMI to give up because the record wasn't selling. The French side of the label defended the album for ten days and then that was it, they moved on, gave up. On the Belgian side, they were a little more insistent, and for a month or two they tried to defend the record […] They thought maybe they could make an airplay [i.e., synonym of "rotation," repeated radio broadcasting of limited musical playlists] out of it, and they succeeded to some extent, so that saved them a bit. For me, it meant I could live off the album a bit longer. But I took a serious beating, and that was hard. I got fired from the label, the publisher fired me, the manager fired me... Everybody fired me (in Bossavie 2018).

Impala Hotel is probably the first musical project in Francophone Belgium by an artist from the rap music and hip hop scene to address specifically and explicitly the themes of migration pathways and experiences, racism and discrimination, Afropeanity, neocolonialism, intercultural circulation, or negritude (see below). Nevertheless, nowadays Baloji does not consider that his artworks are part of a specific cause:

> Far be it from me to do that. You can't serve a cause. Nor do I intend to. It would be a mistake to do so. I embody a certain mix of cultures because I embody what I am. But embodying anti-racism? No. Because I don't believe in it. Society is structurally racist and I'm not going to change that (in Zacharie 2023: n.p.).

In 2010, Pitcho released his second album, *Crise de nègre* [*Negro Crisis*], whose main themes echo those addressed by Baloji in *Impala Hotel*. The musical approach is also similar, with instrumental compositions that do not necessarily fit into the majority aesthetic codes of rap

[277] The album is now available on streaming platforms from Parlophone Music (a division of EMI) as publisher. As Baloji explained in interview, this project is a "Congolese version" revisiting the original album. For example, the song "*Tout ceci ne vous rendra pas le Congo*" is all played with acoustic instrumentals, on which backing vocals and choirs are added in a way of giving the song a Congolese rumba mood (Bossavie 2018).

music production at the time in Francophone Belgium and a title track more akin to slam or spoken word than rap music. Addressing the evolution of his audience over the years, Pitcho explained in a 2013 interview:

> I know that my audience is evolving, because musically, without doing it on purpose, I've always been more or less where people didn't expect me to be. My first album, with tracks like '*Schaerbeek*' and '*Ma part du ghetto*', was really aimed at an urban audience. With *Crise de nègre*, I went back to something a little more intimate, which could appeal to people who only like Africa, for example, or lyrics. […] In any case, my approach has always been to say to myself that the world doesn't stop at the corner of my street, and culture doesn't stop at hip hop culture. I'm clearly aware of my hip hop culture; it's my base, but it's also a way of going further (in *Le Soir* 2013: n. p).

The lyrics of "*Crise de nègre*" are written autobiographically and give the general framework of the album, as shown by these excerpts from the first verse:

One December day in the heart of darkness/ I came out of the ashes without knowing I was a Negro

[...]

All because dad wouldn't walk in his footsteps/ So he fell prey to the Leopard King

We had to leave the jungle and go see somewhere else/ We crossed the sea, landed in the shit

[…]

For my brother and me, school was the first shock/ Our first teachers had trouble pronouncing our names

Proof that they would have trouble finding us normal/ Hurt deeply from their first word

We understood that we would have trouble penetrating their world/ And hanging out with their kids.

Pitcho recalls his exile from the DRC because his family would be threatened by Mobutu, one of whose nicknames was "the leopard,"[278] and his arrival in Belgium to experience racism and discover that he was "a Negro" in this new "world."

The chorus of the song captures its central aim, as well as that of the whole album:

In all this mess I'm looking for my place/ I can't find it and it's bothering me

[278] To make people believe in a supposed "Africanness" of which he would be the example, Mobutu used to wear a leopard-print toque. It was also a way for him to fake a political legitimacy that customary chiefs and traditional high-ranking dignitaries in the Congo would accord to him, the symbolism of the leopard being particularly important in Congolese cultures and social orders (Gossiaux 2016).

On the verge of a nervous breakdown/ I've developed a negro crisis
When I talk about it one tell me I'm exaggerating/ But deep down it hurts me and I've got to deal with it
I can't swallow it so I've got to puke it up/ My negro crisis.

This chorus gives us a better understanding of the wordplay used by Pitcho for the album title and title song. The use of the formulation "nervous breakdown" ("*crise de nerfs*" in French) allows him to shed light on the issue of the impact of racism on mental health. For example, in Francophone Belgium, the concept of racial charge, inspired by feminist thoughts, has become increasingly visible since the murder of George Floyd and the BLM protests. This charge, or burden, refers to the psychological pressure undergone by people exposed to racial stigmatization, which results in a perpetual adaptation of their behavior to avoid or prepare themselves for discrimination or aggression based on racial stereotypes (Bosuma W'okungu Bakili 2020). Remembering certain previous theoretical developments related to commercial and cultural (mis)appropriation, it is precisely this charge from the experience of racism and racial discrimination that can be a source of debate and controversy when people who have not lived through it practice cultural and artistic forms that have emerged from these same experiences, without ever explicitly talking about them and/or showing forms of commitment against racism.

In her 2020 book *Le Triangle et l'Hexagone. Réflexions sur une identité noire* (*The Triangle and the Hexagon: Reflections on black identity*), the French author M. Soumahoro provides thoughts on the racial charge. She argues that in a context of systematic denial of racism and the discriminatory situations it engenders, the racial charge can imply a double responsibility for "unfavorably racialized people," that of enduring and explaining in order to "find a happy ending to the aggressions and injustices, small or large, suffered":

> We have the exhausting task of explaining, translating and making violent, discriminatory or racist situations intelligible [...] We have to manage and reassure the dominant class and its members [...] And even when this inequality is discussed, the dominant group must be able to maintain its comfort, its privilege, its centrality. This comfort enjoyed by the dominant must be maintained at all costs, notably through the imposition of silence (Soumahoro 2020: 135–136).

Hypervigilance, the duty to stand as an example, to work harder than others, to dress and do hair "correctly" (according to the social codes of the dominant group), all appear to be

consequences of the racial charge. In her book 2018 *White Fragilty: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism* (2020 for the French version), Robin DiAngelo develops several thoughts about the burden of race throughout the book. She explains, for example, that people who are not racially discriminated against can observe a certain "racial relaxation" regarding racism, and thus benefit from a mental and intellectual space that non-white people do not have. She points out: "They don't lack these benefits just because they are members of a numerical minority […] People of color lack these benefits because they are racialized within a culture of white supremacy—a culture in which they are seen as inferior, if they are seen at all" (DiAngelo 2020: 107). Pitcho's lyrics on "*Crise de nègre*" provide an insight into what this charge means to him, as we can see from the second verse:

The first time someone told me I was black/ I took it as an insult
In fact, the kid who told me that, I called his mother a whore/ And his mother yelled at me, telling me I was a bully
That was the start of my struggle/ Hand-to-hand combat
Wounds on the menu/ I was seven years old and for some a little Satan
Apparently, with time, rage spreads and then fades/ And I'm waiting
I'm in my thirties/ I've been through so much hate
And so many unanswered questions/ Despite the temptations, I haven't thrown in the towel yet
Despite tons of action/ I've got a feeling
That for mine, nothing changes anyway/ Don't talk to me about lack of luck
When ours is seen to be too much/ Seen to be so much too much that some people
Lighten their complexion/ In search of a certain elixir
To ward off fate/ Instead of moving forward together and combining efforts

He recalls how he discovered that he was "black" in Belgium, this racialization marking the start of a struggle to be accepted in this society. At the end of the verse, he refers to skin lightening practices (bleaching) using cosmetic techniques and tools to depigment the skin by reducing melanin. He regrets the use of this practice by people who think they could avoid racism by doing it, instead of fighting the phenomenon in solidarity with others. Verse three is written in the same framework, starting: "*The silence of our parents is eloquent/ For a long time the model was the white one*." The thoughts are then developed as follows:

When one speaks of us, everything becomes complex/ Always this impression that it's only ours who are oppressed

Who live badly and have almost a dog's life/ Who have a future that obsesses because it leaves too much perplexity

A future that prevents us from breaking the chains/ From no longer bending our backs, from climbing the ladder

From no longer seeing the signs of hope drawn by the smiles of our children/ From believing that it's possible to succeed without begging for charity

The outro of the song states: "*This is not a cry of anger, it's no longer about color/ But here, it's about pain, buried deep in my heart*." In a 2009 interview about the album, Pitcho expanded on this this outro: "I've had some really depressing moments. But I've always kept the will to fight. That's the story of my career. This 'Negro Crisis' sometimes pushes me to be serious. But I try to keep my distance. I try to see the big picture rather than just complain about it" (in Capart 2009: n.p.).

The album cover features a drawing of Pitcho centered on his face and holding a hat in his hand. Several characters, scenes, and objects are also drawn in Pitcho's hair and on the hat. The hair features a scene that seems to evoke forced labor during colonization, as well as another representing a Congolese man breaking chains and reuniting with his companion. We can also discern a traditional Congolese mask and an automatic pistol at the top of Pitcho's head. Several political and cultural icons of African origins are also represented, including Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympic Games giving the Black Power salute, Joséphine Baker, Mohamed Ali, Louis Armstrong, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Bob Marley, a Tuareg warrior (perhaps in connection with the Kaocen revolt against French colonialists in Niger), Nelson Mandela, Patrice Lumumba, and Miles Davis. Behind Pitcho's head, a group of people can be seen watching two other people being hanged, certainly to signify the practice of lynching in the US among white supremacist movements, the most notorious being the Ku Klux Klan. The hat features other contemporary icons such as Public Enemy, Michael Jakson, and Barack Obama. We also see a character dressed for desert travel and riding a camel, perhaps to represent the music group Tinariwen.[279] We can also distinguish a classic police car and a riot police vehicle, a menu from a fast-food restaurant with a soda (probably to signify the presence of American brands such as McDonald's and Coca-Cola almost everywhere in the world), skyscrapers, barrels of radioactive waste, the three wise monkeys, and an open box of what appear to be medical pills. A boombox is also depicted in the center of the design on the hat.

[279] A music group created in the early 1980s that combines blues, rock and traditional Tuareg music.

This drawing appears to be a graphic representation of the nervous crisis/negro crisis related by Pitcho.

In 2012, Skinfama, a not-for-profit music production organization created by Pitcho, released a music video made of image and documentary editing for the song "*Crise de nègre*." This video is similar to the clip for another Pitcho song analyzed above, "*Le bras en l'air, poing serré*." It begins with archive footage of Lumumba, followed by images of marches and demonstrations in the DRC. This is followed by images of Mobutu as a young man. Then we see a short extract from Hubert's character in the movie *La Haine* [*Hate*],[280] followed by an image of Denzel Washington, who portrayed Malcolm X in Spike Lee's movie based on his autobiography and known for his personal commitment against racism. Next appear images of a colonialist missionary speaking to an assembly of black children in the Belgian Congo. The order of appearance of these images and archive excerpts follows the progression of the lyrics. At the beginning of the first chorus, the famous image of a colonial advertisement announcing slave auctions and "negroes to be sold"[281] is shown before a graphic representation of a slave ship. Next come images of the BSF in the US, Martin Luther King and a banner with the title of the protest song "We Shall Overcome." Some images of several cartoons with racist caricatures and depictions are then shown. The "negroes to be sold" image reappears at the beginning of the second verse, before several video extracts of the BPP, its activities and symbolism. Next, we see images of traditional Congolese folklore and colonial Congo during the conquest of independence, mixed with images of the Civil Rights movement, Black Power, Nelson Mandela, and Thomas Sankara.[282] The video ends with an image of the Black Power salute.

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[280] The movie provides an insider's view inspired by the daily lives of young people living in French *cités* and facing police violence. Hubert (performed by the Franco-Beninese actor and director Hubert Koundé) is one of the three main protagonists (French actor Vincent Cassel plays Vinz, another one of the three). He is famous for a line that has gained cult status since the film's release. The film opens with a story told by Hubert, "the story of a human who falls from a fifty-floor building" and which repeats over and over as it falls "so far so good." However, as explained by Hubert: "The important [thing] is not the fall, but the landing." During the movie's final scene, Hubert repeats the same story, except that the protagonist is no longer a "human" but a whole "society." The 2017 Liège Political Book Fair proposed a screening of the movie as opening, in collaboration with the YCF and the *Maison des Sciences de l'Homme* (House of Human Sciences) in Liège. Since the theme "so far so good" was that of this year's edition, the idea was to give a voice to young people on this main theme and related issues. The YC La Mézon, in the city of Huy (in the Liège region), was enthusiastic about the initiative and took part in the event.

[281] See *The Monticello Classroom* (2024), "To Be Sold."

[282] Thomas Sankara was a pan-African revolutionary leader from Burkina Faso. After rising through the army, he took power in 1983 to implement a series of reforms to combat neo-colonialism and corruption, promote social justice, and ensure food self-sufficiency. He was assassinated in 1987 during a coup and became an emblematic and inspiring figure for pan-Africanism, the self-determination of peoples, and the fight against oppression. In 2022, Blaise Compaoré, who took power following the coup and held it until 2014 (when he was overthrown by

The lyrics, the album cover, and the video of "*Crise de nègre*" allow us to further develop a concept appearing central to Baloji's and Pitcho's artworks discussed so far and central to the theoretical and analytical framework of my thesis, that of negritude. While negritude can be considered a synonym for blackness, it is worth clarifying the concept by going back over its historical emergence. Negritude is a concept that emerged in Francophone literary and political circles during the inter-war years, whose main figures are the Nardal sisters (Paulette and Jeanne Nardal), Aimé Césaire, and Léopold Sédar Senghor. In 1987, the "First Hemispheric Conference of Black Diaspora Peoples" was held at the Florida International University in Miami. During this bilingual conference in English and French, Césaire gave a speech entitled "Négritude, Ethnicity et Cultures Afro aux Amériques," better known as the "Speech on Negritude." Beginning his speech by returning to the similar concept of "ethnicity", he specified: "Négritude is not essentially biological. Clearly, beyond the immediate biological, it refers to something deeper, to a sum of lived experiences" (Césaire 2004 [1987]: 80–81). Illuminating the "common denominator" bringing together the conference participants, he explained that "what they have in common is not necessarily their skin color, but the fact that they are somehow linked to human groups that have suffered the worst violence in history, groups that have suffered and often still suffer from being marginalized and oppressed," thus constituting a "community of deep discrimination," as well as a "community of continuous resistance, obstinate struggle for freedom and indomitable hope" built around lived experience and a "collective memory" (ibid.: 82).

It is thus this kind of collective memory of lived experience, whether called "blackness" or "negritude," that inspired Baloji and Pitcho in their respective projects. They have appropriated it and put it into perspective with their own life experiences and path in order to relate them more effectively. Such a perspective appears thus built on experiences and not on essentialist foundations, even though the poison of the essentializing creature is never far from potential prey. In a short report by the TV channel BX1, filmed at various locations in Schaerbeek for the album release, Pitcho explained its overall artistic approach: "I wanted to talk about my relationship with Belgium, my relationship with Congo, my relationship with rap, my relationship with music. And in fact, I realized that in a way, color has played a big part in my path, in the people I've met, even in my inner wounds."[283] During the same report, Pitcho stops

the population before fleeing to Côte d'Ivoire), was sentenced in absentia for having given the order to assassinate Thomas Sankara.

[283] See *BX1* (2010), "Pitcho présente Crise de nègre sur Télé Bruxelles" (starting from 0:20).

in front of the entrance to the Halles de Schaerbeek and highlights that it was an important cultural venue at the time of the spread and structuring of the Francophone Belgian hip hop movement in the late 1990s, because it was a place that "dared to take risks" to avoid "remaining static."[284] These explanations are illustrated by archives of the 1997 Lezarts Hip Hop festival at the Halles de Schaerbeek (see Chapter 9).

In one of the report's sequences, we also see Pitcho looking at records in a record shop and talking about one or other record that may have inspired him. These analytical elements attest to the intercultural circulation of music, allowing a dynamic of glocalization through appropriation of US blackness into the specific social context of Francophone Belgium using hip hop. This glocalization appears thus as a process of cultural exchange. In the case of the Baloji and Pitcho projects analyzed here, the concept of negritude can be mobilized to attest to this circulation and exchange, whose common denominator is the shared experience of racial discrimination and resistance to it. In this way, collective memories and political consciousness of these experiences can be transmitted in Francophone Belgium through rap music. These examples illustrate thus a process of empowerment of racialized people with the help of rap music and hip hop culture, used as "a starting point, a springboard for exploring a much wider world" (Sarkar and Allen 2007: 94). Indeed, emphasizing that negritude "is not just passive […] and results from an active and offensive attitude of mind," Aimé Césaire (2004: 84–85, 88) perceives it as "the grasp by ourselves of our past and, through poetry, through the imaginary, through the novel, through works of art, the intermittent flash of our possible future," before stating that "it was here in the United States, among you, that Negritude was born. The first Negritude was American Negritude." Nowadays, there are many examples of intercultural and international circulation of negritude, the Francophone rap music scene being no exception.

In 2010, the Brussels rapper G.A.N (Ghandi at the time) independently released his first official album, *Le Point G* (The G Point). One year later, the album's title song was remixed by G.A.N himself ("G. Remix"), featuring French rappers of Congolese origin (from both the DRC and Congo-Brazzaville). The following is quoted from G.A.N's lyrics:

And why are we called macaques?/ The first man who went from liana to liana was a white [in English in the original lyrics]

[284] See *BX1* (2010), "Pitcho présente Crise de nègre sur Télé Bruxelles" (starting from 3:00).

Don't act too hot, you won't last long [in French: "tu ne feras pas long feu"]/ Welcome to BXL, here we speak in 'fieu' [slang expression from Walloon language, used in Brussels, Liège, and Francophone Belgium, initially referring to any male person; "Fieke" or "fieuse" can be used for women]

By evoking a white man moving from liana to liana, he refers to the fictional character Tarzan to deconstruct elements of colonial propaganda assimilating individuals of sub-Saharan origins to beings closer to the ape than to the human. Today, the scientific consensus considers that human beings are apes in their own right; they are not descended from apes, they are apes. Therefore, we are no longer looking for a "missing link" between primates and human beings that racist propaganda sees in sub-Saharan African populations, but for a "last common ancestor" between distant cousins. The French rapper Youssoupha, who was born in the DRC and arrived in France aged ten, raps the last verse from which the following line is taken: "*I could have come bling-bling [in English in the original lyrics]* when I was rapping at least/ There was so much of our gold on the beautiful crown of King Baudouin,*" while showing to the camera a t-shirt representing Lumumba.

Youssoupha is known for the militant and denunciatory nature of some of his lyrics and for highlighting cultural diversity related to Africa and around the world, making him a major figure in French rap. In 2015, he released an album called *NGRTD*, shorthand for "Negritude."[285] He recalls this choice of title in an interview conducted for the release of the album:

> In fact, there's a history with the name 'négritude'. When my first album came out [called *Noir D***** (or sometimes *Noir Désir* [*Black Desire*]), I already wanted to call it 'Négritude', but this caused tension in my professional entourage. They thought the name was too communitarian. And, ten years later, now that I've grown up and achieved a lot, I thought it

[285] The song "Black Out" is particularly interesting for this analysis. One week after the album release, Youssoupha published on the streaming platforms a "commented version" of *NGRTD* in which he explains his approach to each track through a short audio commentary on each. As he explains about "Black Out": "the 'Black Out' hook came to mind, i.e., I got behind the microphone and I was doing 'Black Out, Black Out, Black Out' and for an album called *Negritude*, I had quite a few things to say about the African situation and black identity etc. and that started to inspire me to do things on that theme and so I played along [...] It's a militant track, yeah, you have to assume that. It's a song of demands too. A bit of denunciation perhaps, and that's that." The first verse of the song begins as follows: "Africa new western, I rob dignitaries in diligence/ I'm not even an expert, I'm neither military nor militant/ When the people hope to lead their leaders/ Sectarian colonizers are back to divide our dividends". The end of the second and last verse states: "Negrophobia in the West, even worse in the Maghreb/ And ignorance remains the worst form of submission/ I'm not a product of immigration, I'm a product of colonization/ I pray for mobilization, hope after crises/ I don't want to be a victim of history, I want my children to write it/ Because I believe in their future, in the fruits of their efforts/ Gold, oil, land, schools, hope, youth, dream, chorus."

> wouldn't be a problem. But no, the same old feedback. Finally, I realized that the word scares some people, even though black identity is a strong theme in my record. And it's an identity that has long been stigmatized in France and elsewhere (in Laïreche 2015: n.p.).

He discussed then racial discrimination in France in several areas of activity, before explaining: "In fact, I've reappropriated the term in my own way, while giving back to [Aimé] Césaire what belongs to [Aimé] Césaire, which is why you hear his voice and his words on the album. But you mustn't take me for a spokesman, I'm simply a relay." During the same interview, when asked whether "the role of the rapper" is to "get a message across," Youssoupha explained his point of view:

> Yes, the rapper can have a political dimension, but sometimes he's mistaken for the fireman on duty. Every time things get hot, he's called in to comment and calm things down. In one of my texts, I say, 'I'm trying to make you feel good, but I have no intention of educating you'. So when we talk about the responsibility of rappers, I say 'take it easy'. Young people have parents, teachers, educators, elected representatives.... If we're waiting for the solution to save society to come from rappers, we're really in the shit (ibid.).

In 2013, G.A.N released a song called "*Roi des Belges*" ["King of the Belgians"] on his EP *Les balles perdues II* [*Lost Bullets II*]. The song is a classic rapological exercise in ego trip and metaphorical punchlines anchored in reality, which reflects G.A.N's songwriting quite well. The lyrics begin as follows: "*Lord, how many on the Richter scale?/ To move all these mountains*," before stating:

King, King of the Belgians but I won't cut off any arms/ I want to live and die in Kinshasa
Lord, tell me, how did Lumumba die?/ And if me too Belgium will kill me […]
Wow, why so many poems?/ They all want my skin, my color attracts hatred
At the end of my songs, I hear them cry 'Amen'/ Looking to the sky, hoping to see G.A.N again, King of the Belgians […]
I want to sell records like fries (eh)/ Like Semira [Adamu] a lot of hushed-up cases

G.A.N claims to be the King of the Belgians, or rather in this context, the King of Belgian rappers. He also writes a few lines about racism and postcolonial memory in Belgium, referring to figures such as Lumumba and Adamu, in addition to the King of the Belgians.

In 2017, Pitcho created a theater piece called *Kuzikiliza*, produced by his label Skinfama and interpreting the 1960 Congo independence ceremony, with a special focus on the famous speech

by Lumumba. The title of the piece is a Swahili word meaning "making yourself heard" and the staging revolves around three artists from the Belgian hip hop movement: Pitcho, Karim Kalonji (dancer and choreographer), and Joost Maaskant (beatboxer and vocal artist). During an interview about the play, Pitcho explained the approach behind its creation:

> In my career, I've always been guided by rap with a message, touched by people like Malcom X, Martin Luther King, Lumumba, all these committed people who spoke of freedom even at the cost of their lives. I think I also had a particular desire to tell this story, which is a Belgian story. I find that Belgians tend not to want to tell their own stories, or at least don't allow the people who are directly concerned by this story to tell what they're going through, what they think about it, and for me it was a way of saying: 'I don't necessarily want to wait for you'. As in rap, I've always been lulled by this mentality that says 'don't wait for someone to do things for you, do it yourself'! It is to embody this philosophy that 'Kuzikiliza' exists (in Imambajev 2017: n.p.).

The same year, as part of changes including the removal of certain statues and changing the names of some parks, the city council of Charlottesville in Virginia decided to remove a statue of General Robert E. Lee who led Confederate troops of the slave states during the American Civil War.[286] As a result of this decision, clashes and tensions between white supremacists and anti-racist activists happened and escalated to the point that an anti-racist protester was killed when a neo-Nazi drove his car into the crowd during protests. These events highlighted the persistence of racism in American society and the city became a symbol of it and of the public debates about Confederate monuments and the teaching of American history and slavery. In 2021, the city removed the statues of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, another Confederate general.

In this context, Pitcho wrote a blog article for the news and opinion website *Equal Times*, focusing on culture, politics, human rights, and social justice. The article is entitled "*De Charlottesville à Bruxelles, la mémoire collective à l'épreuve des monuments* [From Charlottesville to Brussels, collective memory put to the test by monuments]" and overviews the issue of postcolonial memory in Belgium by drawing parallels with the recent discussions in Charlottesville about racism and memory confrontations between white supremacists and human rights defenders. Pitcho (2017: n.p.) explains:

[286] This decision follows the efforts of some protest groups seeking the removal of Confederate monuments and memorials.

> Having done all my studies in Belgium, I suddenly became aware of the invisibility of these 80 years of shared history in the educational and cultural sphere, as well as in the urban and media spheres. Most of the existing traces on this subject honored terrifying and bloody characters. These so-called heroes became my executioners. Despite their horrific deeds, they always had the right role. Few voices dared to denounce this kind of evidence. Why the censorship around these issues? Is it because many of Belgium's wealthiest families still owe their fortune to this period? Or because the current sovereign is a descendant of Leopold II?

Referring to the questioning of monuments to glorify Belgian colonialism and Leopold II, he asks: "Whether in Germany, Spain, South Africa, Russia or the United States, many countries have had this type of debate to openly confront their darkest hours. Why not Belgium?" He continues by stating: "Like our multicultural societies, diversity should be built into our various institutional machines. Openly acknowledging the tragedies caused by colonization would be a major step towards 'living together'." This reflection is also central to considerations relating to negritude, Césaire (2004: 84) pointing out that "historically, Negritude was a form of revolt against the world system of culture as it had developed over the last few centuries, characterized by a certain number of prejudices and pre-suppositions that led to a very strict hierarchy."

In the aforementioned interview from the same year, Pitcho was asked whether "hip-hop culture is the one that can best carry Lumumba's message?" His answer, which recalls the one given to me in a 2012 radio interview after a performance of *Crise de nègre* (see Chapter 1), outlines nuances relating to the sociopolitical commitment of artists from hip hop:

> I've never been an activist. It pisses me off because it blocks you. I have the impression that to be an activist you have to have an enemy, whereas things are much more complex. I could be my own enemy. Hip-hop culture is a tool, it's a culture that's dear to my heart, that corresponds to a certain vision I have of life. I wanted to use these tools to talk about that. They're tools that correspond to our times, even if yesterday's rap isn't today's rap, it's evolving. The real danger is to cling to memories. Thinking that memories are the only thing that's true and right. Hip-hop is like a beautiful story, you remember the good memories and forget the things that didn't go so well. We're not immune to bad things and good things (in Imambajev 2017: n.p.).

Speaking of the cultural center project dedicated to the contribution of sub-Saharan African diasporas in Belgium for which I worked as researcher in 2018, the issues at stake in this project are the same as those discussed here, although it is not particularly focused on hip hop. Indeed, the two main general missions proposed for the organization of the center's activities relate to contributing to the visibility, recognition, and valorization of all cultural, artistic, and intellectual expressions of Afro-descendants in Belgium, and to inscribing its action in a

dynamic of citizen participation and mutual understanding articulated around the reflexive and critical analysis of societies and the preservation of the history and memory of the sub-Saharan diasporas in Belgium (Gossiaux and Martiniello 2018). In 2019, following this preparatory work to implement the center, I was invited to take part in the discussions of the "cultural mediation" and "governance" working groups,[287] before the Covid pandemic put the implementation of such a project on hold.

This project was also carried out as part of the International Decade for People of African Descent 2015–2024 (IDPAD), proclaimed by the UN General Assembly. As a special procedures of the Human Rights Council, the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent (WGEPAD), mandated since 2001 in accordance with the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action to study problem of racial discrimination facing individuals of African descent worldwide, is in charge of conducting country visits and reporting annually to the UN Human Rights Council on all of its activities relating to its mandate. As part of its fact-finding mission in Belgium related to the IDPAD, the WGEPAD visited Brussels, Antwerp, Liège, Namur, and Charleroi. Invited by the People of African Descent Belgium Observatory (PAD Belgium), which prepared the WGEPAD Belgian tour, I presented the cultural center project. In its report following the visit and speaking of postcolonial discourse and contemporary racism, the WGEPAD (2019b: 7) highlights:

> There is clear evidence that racial discrimination is endemic in institutions in Belgium. Civil society organizations have reported common manifestations of racial discrimination, xenophobia, Afrophobia and related intolerance faced by people of African descent. The root causes of present-day human rights violations lie in a lack of recognition of the true scope of the violence and injustice of colonization. As a result, public discourse does not reflect a nuanced understanding of how institutions may drive systemic exclusion from education, employment and opportunity. The Working Group concludes that inequalities are deeply entrenched because of structural barriers that intersect and reinforce each other. Credible efforts to counter racism require such hurdles to be overcome first.

The report also refers to the glorification of Belgian colonization in the public space:

> We note with concern the public monuments and memorials that are dedicated to King Leopold II and Force Publique officers, given their complicity in atrocities in Africa. The Working Group is of the view that closing the dark chapter in history, and reconciliation and healing, requires

[287] The work of the various working groups has led to a document of general recommendations for implementation, taking up the conclusions of the thematic workshops on which the participants agreed (Collectif MCA 2019).

> that Belgians should finally confront, and acknowledge, King Leopold II's and Belgium's role in colonization and its long-term impact on Belgium and Africa (ibid.: 8).

In the 34 recommendations addressed to the Belgian Government, the WGEPAD (ibid.: 16) selected the cultural center project as an interesting example of future projects to be implemented related to postcolonial memory: "The Working Group urges the government to fund creative projects by people of African descent such as the House of African Culture [provisional name], among others, with the view of raising the visibility of all forms of African expression and preserving the history and memory of the African Diaspora."

This cultural center project proved to be of particular interest to my thesis work and provided inputs for the reflections that helped structure my doctoral project and research. Pitcho was part of the panel of people I consulted to validate a proposal for a founding charter and to set up an implementation committee in direct contact with the competent political cabinet and the relevant administration that allocated an additional proper budget to continue the implementation. He approved the implementation proposal, in particular the cultural mediation component aimed at young people and designed to give "urban cultures," mainly hip hop, a full place in the cultural center. Although the project was put on hold for an indefinite period following the pandemic, I had the opportunity to speak with him again on several occasions, pending a possible resumption of the implementation.

During interviews with the panel of resource persons, I also met Frédéric Lubansu, a Belgian-Congolese (DRC) *métis* actor (see "métissage"*), director, and cultural mediator based in Brussels, and subsequently joined the not-for-profit organization he had founded in 2014 with Clair-Maël Kaya, management consultant and program manager for various international organizations, of Congo-Brazzaville origin and living in Brussels. The association is called Afropean Project and aims to "encourage the active participation of Afropeans in the European socio-economic and cultural sphere. The organization seeks collective empowerment to bring about positive change in society, as well as the promotion of diversity in all areas of public life, intercultural dialogue, and living together"[288] (Afropean Project 2022: 2). The organization implements, develops, sponsors, and participates in trainings and workshops, as well as (socio)cultural and artistic events. It also realizes and participates in various studies and reports

[288] The latest version of our statutes to be published in the Belgian Official Journal (2025) also explicitly includes "the fight against racism and racial discrimination."

at national or international level. Hip hop is an important component of our activities, as we mobilize them for several purposes, from attracting people to public events to using its creative potential and platform of expressions to implement cultural democracy projects. For example, in summer 2021, an outside public event was held in the municipality of Ixelles (Brussels) to give visibility to cultural and social not-for-profit organizations in a context of political attempts to manage the coronavirus pandemic. We ran a promotional stand with Afropean Project, and I asked DJ Ojjo from my collective Under Tha Bridge to mix with me that afternoon to attract passers-by, tell them about our actions and approach, and collect their contact details to inform them directly in future about our current and upcoming projects.

It is now time to introduce the shift that Francophone Belgian rap music began to engage in from around 2010.

Section 2

Commercial shift and protest: Insights from postcolonial experiences and the Black Lives Matter movement in Francophone Belgium

In 2009, the Stromae phenomenon began to explode in Belgium and around the world. This Brussels-based artist of Belgian and Rwandan origins, who emerged from the rap scene and collaborated as music composer for Belgian and French artists such as James Deano and Kery James, released their first hit "*Alors on danse*" ["So We Dance"], remixed countless times since then, including by Kanye West just a few weeks after the song's international release in 2010. As shown by the first verse, the song's lyrics speak of a certain spleen specific to his generation, highlighting a growing phenomenon of pessimism, loss of adherence to and profound questioning of dominant societal models, to which are sometimes added the occurrence of mental disturbances, following various "crises" that have traversed Western societies. This song and the subsequent projects by Stromae would shed light on the Belgian musical scene, as only a few artists of various genres were able to do before him.

"*Alors on danse*" is reminiscent of another hit, "Pump Up the Jam," released 20 years earlier. The production style is the same, hip house or house rap. This genre, which combines aesthetic codes borrowed from both hip hop and house, emerged in the 1980s in Chicago and London. As hip house is intended primarily for house club dance floors, the instruments used in this sub-genre adopt electronic music-type sounds and frequencies, produced directly by synthesizers

(or modular synthesizers) and drum machines, or indirectly by samplers that allow the addition and combination of a series of sound effects of all types (reverb, echo, delay, distortion, etc.) over the rhythm section or the samples and instruments. Nowadays, this process can be easily centralized on one or more computers or accomplished using this tool. These electronic sounds are then composed and harmonized to create short, catchy melody loops that stick in minds and are easy to remember, as is the case with rap music. While house and rap already share the use of prominent and engaging drumbeats, the tempo of a hip house track is often faster than that of a rap track, while hip house favors rapped interpretations rather than singing ones and borrows other musical techniques from hip hop culture, such as turntablism and scratching.

The existence of tracks such as "Pump Up the Jam" and "*Alors on danse*" shows that there have always been significant connections and mutual inspiration between hip hop and musical genres that emerged around the same time, such as house music. Although the hip house genre has been the subject of sometimes virulent criticism from "purists" claiming to be hip hop or house enthusiasts, "it would be wrong not to acknowledge the influences that certain artists have drawn from it" (*Interlude* 2020). The similarities between these two songs can also be identified in the common theme of their lyrics, namely that of partying in nightclubs. The difference is that "Pump Up the Jam" promotes a certain ode to partying, while "*Alors on danse*" reflects a certain weariness with life in general and therefore also with the act of partying to escape this daily weariness. This feeling is also reflected in Stromae's vocal performance, which adopts a rather haunting and repetitive singing style and a monotonous tone throughout.

This artist's journey also shows how the tools of the interactive Internet that emerged in the early 2000s have enabled music artists to find new opportunities and maybe develop a professional career in the context of an art world where the music industry is still absent.[289] Social networks such as Dailymotion, YouTube, Facebook, and then Instagram may have acted as a springboard for some artists before becoming essential communication tools used by everyone. This configuration integrating Web 2.0 tools as essential elements in the promotion of artists' projects facilitates access to a public that may have heard of one project and would

[289] For example, among the promotional content that gave a lot of visibility to the song in 2010 is a famous video by Stromae and the French humorist Jamel Debouzze entitled "Jamel's lesson to Stromae." In this video, in the form of a comedy sketch, Stromae pretends to encounter difficulties when composing "*Alors on danse*" and asks Jamel for help. When it comes to thinking about the song's lyrics, Jamel explains to Stromae that he perceives a certain "depressive," "nonchalant," or "casualness" mood when listening to the instrumental composition, before Stromae starts singing the first verse of the song.

like to discover it freely. This configuration must also be seen in the context of the CD industry's crisis in the 2000s, some of whose causes can be attributed to these technological developments in communications and, consequently, to the failure of the music industry's main actors to anticipate these developments related to the issue of the dematerialization of artworks. Since then, the industry seems to have successfully adapted to evolve and bounce back from this crisis, regaining significant control over the monetization and recovery of rights (royalties) related to digitally transferred music content.

As was the case in the 2000s, Web 2.0 seems essential in understanding the evolution of the art world of Francophone Belgian rap in the 2010s, with distances between artist and audience gradually shrinking. It is in this context that Shay, a Brussels rapper from Congolese and Polish origins, began to make herself known to a wider audience. Shay appears on French rapper Booba's 2011 *Autopsie Vol. 4* [*Autopsy Vol. 4*] mixtape, singing a track featuring Booba. The song "Cruella" appears to be a classic exercise in gangsta rap, referencing adherence to certain codes contrary to dominant social models (e.g., use of violence), while displaying adherence to other codes not constrained by dominant models (e.g. profit-seeking). For example, Shay's lyrics include the following: "*Which one is faster, to apply or to hold up?/ Time is money, I've got time to earn*."

It is also worth noting that Booba is the artist who most embodied the evolution of a French rap trend towards (US) gangsta rap (and all its sub-genres), a trend that is nowadays largely dominant in the French rap industry.[290] Some of his lyrics on his 2002 debut solo album take on a more explicit meaning when analyzed in this context, such as "*May French hip hop rest in peace*" in "*Repose en paix*," or "*So I ask for a timeout because we're getting screwed on the scoreboard/ A flow of pork, I'm here to open other doors*," in "*Temps mort*" ["Timeout"]. At the end of 2013, *Or noir* [*Black Gold*], the debut album by French rapper Kaaris, who came to the attention of the general public thanks to Booba, opened the chapter of trap music in commercialized French rap, such was its immense impact both in terms of the symbolic imaginary associated with this branch of rap, as well as in terms of the aesthetic codifications of musical production that are supposed to reflect this imaginary. This gradual evolution of the French rap industry towards a practice of rap music more explicitly adopting the codes of

[290] The four volumes of Booba's *Autopsie* mixtapes, released between 2005–2011, were intended to keep the public waiting by providing musical content prior to the release of Booba's official albums. The fourth (and final) volume also featured developing artists unknown to the general public, such as Shay and Kaaris.

gangsta rap will also have repercussions in Francophone Belgium. Certain artists, such as Hamza and Damso especially, would embody it while contributing to the development of a new generation of rap artists in Francophone Belgium.

Nowadays dominant in global rap music, trap is a hip hop sub-genre that began to gain widespread popularity in the southern US in the early 2000s, thanks in particular to a resurgence of synthesizers and VST plugins[291] in musical production, made possible by their democratization following technological advances.[292] Inspired by gangsta rap, trap music, named after the Atlanta slang term "trap house" (i.e., a place where drugs are manufactured and sold), originally focuses on drug dealing and related criminal activities and the personal ambition and struggles of its artists. Like all other hip hop sub-genres, the trap music production style is characterized by a very present and lively rhythm section, with the difference that the overall tempo of trap is slower (around 70 BPM) than that of boom bap (around 90 BPM).[293] This allows for more flexibility in creating fast and driving rhythms (e.g., double-time, triple-time, and similarly divided hi-hats or snares), very present bass lines that are almost saturated (originally inspired by certain sounds from the Roland TR-808 drum machine), accompanied by layers of instruments, sounds, and sound effects with diverse atmospheres that form the melodic basis of the song. Musical composition and orchestration can thus be brought to the fore in comparison to the boom bap genre, while trap offers also more room for vocal interpretations,[294] toplines used as vocal hooks, or back vocals such as ad-libs to infuse flavor, emotion, and distinctiveness in the track. The trap music aesthetic is thus initially conceived as a sonic translation of the heightened realities of street life and involvement in illicit activities, notably narcotics trafficking. By establishing this nexus between musical and social practice, the reason why many trap productions possess a somber and unsettling character, for example, becomes more evident, as they exert a visceral influence over the listeners, immersing them both musically and lyrically into a socio-sonic landscape forged on the margins of society.

[291] A Virtual Studio Technology plugin is a piece of software that adds virtual instruments and effects to a Digital Audio Workstation (DAW) to simulate physical studio hardware, like synthesizers or acoustic instruments, allowing music producers to work on their computers without needing expensive equipment.

[292] Key figures in modern trap music include Gucci Mane, Lil Jon, T.I., Outkast, Lil Wayne, T-Pain, Rick Ross, Future, Young Thug, Nicki Minaj, Cardi B, Drake, Migos, and producers/beatmakers Zaytoven, Lex Luger, and Metro Boomin.

[293] Even though the rhythm is indeed slower, the musical composition is often written at twice the actual tempo sought in the track (e.g., a track at 70 BPM will be composed at 140 BPM).

[294] Especially by using Auto-Tune, an audio program that artists such as T-Pain have popularized as an automatic pitch corrector for rappers who want to sing in tune.

Another important new configuration in the Belgian Francophone art world in the 2010s was the presence of new organizations dedicated to the professionalization of rap music in Belgium, offering support to artists as well as concert production and booking activities. For example, Back in the Dayz,[295] a Brussels-based organization active since 2009 and founded by two rap fans from Charleroi close to the new generation, has established itself as a key contact for French rap artists looking to play in Belgium, as well as for Belgian rap artists. During informal discussions with Anthony Consiglio, the co-founder along with Max Meli, at concert evenings, he confirmed to me that the primary objective of Back in the Dayz was to enhance the value of the Belgian rap scene by offering professional support for all activities related to the music industry and thus guarantee artists' integration into it. It has been thought through first and foremost from an economic and commercial point of view, offering services that are very rare in Belgium to rap music artists and, secondly, to young music artists in general.

As the organization has grown, it has been able to offer management, booking, label, and publishing services to groups like La Smala or L'Or du commun, and rappers like Caballero & Jean Jas, and Roméo Elvis. These latter embody a rap practice closer to that initiated by James Deano—distanced from the realities of "the street" and more focused on considerations and perspectives freed from racial discrimination, social exclusion, and economic impoverishment. The great commercial success of some of these artists from the new generation of Francophone Belgian rap confirms the positioning of Back in the Dayz as a key professional artistic agency for rap music in Belgium. This reflects a situation where the involvement of stakeholders with key roles to play in artistic professionalization in terms of management, publishing, and booking activities in the chains of cooperation of certain artists enables them to extend their collaboration networks to benefit from promotion and visibility on a much wider scale. The increasingly structural presence of this type of agent in the art world of Francophone Belgian rap enables it to gradually become more professional, as artists seem to have many more opportunities to make a living from their arts than before. This helps thus to fill a gap in the art world, which has long been decried by artists failing to find opportunities to professionalize their artistic practice, with a few exceptions. In a 2018 interview with Liège rapper Izidore (now pursuing a career as an actor in French cinema), he shared with me his views on the potential support that organizations could offer to emerging artists:

[295] See *Back in the Dayz* (2024), "Back in the Dayz."

> There's not enough infrastructure and methods and support to propel you as an artist [...] You see, that's the problem here in Belgium [...] In fact, when you're an artist here, you don't dare say to yourself: 'Okay, that's it, I'm living an artist's life,' because it's a real hassle, so you have to be convinced that you're good enough to do it, and that you have the character and mental strength to say, 'I'm going to struggle, but I'm going to give it my all.' And that's what's a shame, because there's a lot of talent here who are trying, but because it's too hard, they're obviously afraid, they want security, so they don't dare say to themselves: 'I'm going to give it my all' (2018: n.p.).

During a 2021 filmed interview, Benny B was asked how he saw Brussels in ten years from then in terms of culture. He begins by emphasizing that Belgium's "capacity" and "strength" in this area is its ability to create artistic innovations that will be emulated by many. However, in his opinion, there is a lack of support for this creativity: "The only problem we have is that the infrastructure isn't there to support us. And that's the problem: culturally, we're evolving too fast as actors, but the people around us who could help us aren't evolving fast enough." He continues:

> And that's a warning signal that I'm sounding today [in 2021], that we're letting the golden nuggets we have in the arts perish, we're letting them die because the government can't keep up. I mean, I'm apolitical, so it's all about the cultural system, all those people who were given an envelope to develop this cultural milieu, they're not there, they're absent.

Making the parallel with cultural entertainment dynamics he identifies in the US or in France that would lead to a better visibility and promotion of the artists in these national configurations, Benny B underlines: "We in Belgium are humble, we have humility, but too much humility is too much, it kills! [...] At some point, you have to put modesty aside to put yourself forward [...] We're not put forward and that's crazy. It's bad enough that we don't have any cultural or musical TV shows that put us in the spotlight."[296]

On this last point, it is worth nothing that Back in the Dayz also participated in the creation of Check, a "Francophone urban content production brand" articulated around urban cultures, founded by several people including the journalist Martin Vachiery. It is defined as follows: "Check© is a web platform that highlights the richness and diversity of a new urban culture. A curious, impertinent and free medium. Check© brings people together, involving the best artists

[296] See *Diversité sur scènes* (2021), "Emission – Bruxelles Ma Belle avec BENNY B" (starting from 19:45).

throughout the creative process."[297] In 2017, the RTBF also created a new media channel dedicated to the 15–25 age group, "Generation Z," called Tarmac and "devoted to hip-hop and urban culture." Tarmac presents itself as a multiplatform medium offering a variety of audio and video programs, accessible live or on demand. Users can access content via its website and app, which is also optimized for each social network to appeal to a dynamic, "naturally mobile" audience (*Tarmac* 2017: 2).

In a context in which "the 15–25 age group rarely integrates traditional media into its consumption patterns" (*Tarmac* 2017: 3), the main objective of this public "urban media" is to target Generation Z to meet the requirements of the RTBF management contract and justify the uses of state funding. The Tarmac proto project was thus named "Média Z," and the choice of hip hop and urban cultures as a guideline for editorial content was made as it was considered the most likely to meet this audience. Rapper Akro was subsequently appointed editorial director. Its launching press kit states:

> Hip Hop culture has evolved over the last 40 years around a number of key players. The movement has passed through different generations, with the common feature that each artist appropriates the codes and interprets them with his or her own personal style. Hip Hop is an art form, a way of life and a way of thinking, and Tarmac sees itself as a vector and representative of the different artistic currents that make up today's urban culture (2017: 3).

During the 2021 radio special about the origins of Belgian hip hop, the show's presenter referred to some of the criticisms directed at this media by parts of the Francophone Belgian hip hop scene: "I'm not saying there are only bad things about Tarmac, but you get the impression that it's an RTBF specification." As DJ Rokia Bamba developed: "Absolutely [...] it's mainly for an audience that isn't actually mine, from my generation [...] Akro [...] is also from my generation, but the audience, the specifications precisely, the program contract that they have is really intended for a generation that is my children's generation."[298] The presenter then asks why this is not programmed on the traditional RTBF TV channels, to which Rokia Bamba replied: "It's really ghettoized [...] and it's not saying: 'Here we are proving to you that we're up to date and that hip hop really has its place on national television, on radio stations etc.' [...] It's accepted but not integrated [into the Belgian Francophone audiovisual landscape] […]

[297] See *Check* (n. d.), "A propos."
[298] See *Radio Campus* (2021), "Aux origines du hip-hop belge / Miam des Médias" (starting from 52:35).

Tarmac's mission has yet to be fulfilled."[299] According to this analysis, Tarmac is not necessarily helping to move hip hop out of the place to which it has been assigned, reproducing a certain hierarchy of cultural practices in Francophone Belgium in terms of their recognition and promotion.

During the interview with Fonix (2018: n.p.) from the Nectar organization, he expressed positive views about the creation of Tarmac, pointing out that "no one would have believed that the RTBF would invest in a project, a platform like this," which he believes is a sign "that the authorities and the music industry have woken up in Belgium, and that everyone is starting to take an interest." Today, Tarmac has added a societal vocation to its urban media content, producing video clips several times a week for various social networks addressing thematic and news-related topics. In its *Review of the RTBF management contract (2019–2022)*, the Superior Audiovisual Council in Francophone Belgium notes that "Tarmac has succeeded in reaching an important young audience […] The Tarmac channel on YouTube alone garnered 20 million views out of the 46 million RTBF counted on the platform [in 2019]" (CSA 2022: 56–57). While there are criticisms to be made of the way hip hop culture is used in this new public media, it does seem to be contributing to a (slow) evolution of the general narrative around it and at least giving it more visibility than before.

Melodiggerz,[300] a not-for-profit organization active since 2015 and officially created in 2019 by (Belgian) hip hop fans (record collectors and event organizers), has set itself the mission of preserving the memory of hip hop while contributing to its current development. As explained by Sonny Mariano, one of the founders, in a 2021 filmed interview, it is about promoting the "safeguarding of the Belgian hip hop discography patrimony," while organizing events, promoting artistic connections between DJs and MCs, for example, or being involved in the management and booking of certain artists. The guiding principle of these activities is the promotion of hip hop culture, which represents "the identity of the association."[301] One of its best-known projects is a series of exhibitions launched in 2016 looking back at the years of Belgian hip hop in Brussels, Wallonia, and Flanders since the 1990s through the presentation of record sleeves, entitled "*25 ans de disques*," "*25 ans de disques 2.0.*," and "30 Years of Records (1990–2020) [in English in the original quote]." The existence and activities of such

[299] See *Radio Campus* (2021), "Aux origines du hip-hop belge / Miam des Médias" (starting from 54:45).
[300] See *Melodiggerz* (2020), "About us."
[301] See *Drapeau Blanc TV* (2021), "La création de Melodiggerz - Sonny extrait 1" (starting from 2:00)

an organization also contribute to greater recognition of the Francophone Belgian hip hop scene. On this point, Fonix emphasized: "In general, I think [Francophone Belgian] hip hop is much more recognized than it was a few years ago, and we're taken much more seriously than we used to be, even if it depends on the city" (Nectar 2018: n.p.).

This general context of the art world of Francophone Belgian rap music around 2015 helps to better explain the massive international success of certain artists such as Hamza[302] and Damso. In 2014, Damso released his first solo project, a freely available mixtape entitled *Salle d'attente* [*Waiting Room*]. The project's cover features the (prescient) phrase "*Merci de bien vouloir patienter*" ["Please be patient"]. The eight-track mixtape includes a song entitled "Dems," a fairly classic exercise in ego trip from Damso. The word "Dems" is one of Damso's nicknames, and a hook he often uses as a way of announcing himself.

For example, the song's only verse begins: "*Hey mister, get into politics, that's the only way you'll get my vote* [in French: *voix*]," a way of telling potential imitators that Damso considers himself inimitable, and that the only way to "get his voice" is through the representative system. He raps then: "*I fuck your laws, your dogmas, your kids, my people have suffered for it/ You don't have to be a neuro-physicist to know the sinews of war*." These lyrics can be understood in the background of Damso's childhood in the DRC, from which he had to flee with his family during a major conflict. He arrived in Belgium in 2001, aged nine, initially living in the municipality of Kraainem, next to Brussels, before moving in Matonge at the age of 22. In this context, Damso explained several times in interviews that he encountered racism for the first time when he came to Belgium, learning that in this country he was a considered as a "black" person: "In any case, when I arrived here, the first thing they said to me was 'go home you dirty black'." He continues: "I think I'll always be scary because people are intimidated by what they don't understand, and I think I'm one of those people who's not easily understood: my looks, and everything that goes with them, and my history too. I think I'll always be scary in that sense" (*France Inter* 2021). This is also reminiscent of Pitcho's lyrics in the song "*Crise de nerfs*," where he recalls his arrival in Belgium and discovery of racism as he was considered a "black" person in this new world. These experiences reveal a certain relationship of power

[302] Hamza is a Brussels rapper and beatmaker of Moroccan origin. He stands out among the new generation of Belgian rappers for the originality of his style, which revolves around highly melodic toplines and instrumental productions with light and harmonious orchestrations. He has collaborated with many Belgian and international artists and is nowadays a leader of trap music in Belgium and France. The songs "Paradise" (2019) and "Free YSL" (2023) are good examples of his music.

based on a gesture of minorization, typical of racialization processes designed to maintain minority groups in a position of domination. (Afro/)Negrophobia, the form of racism that Pitcho and Damso report to have experienced, appears then to be rooted in a symbolic system of perception of otherness assigning minority groups to a dominated position.

In the same way, Damso raps the following in the 2015 song "*Poséidon*": "*I'm never wrong, only death will defeat me/ 'We don't share the same fate said to me the daron* [French slang for dad]*, son, don't forget you're a nigga* [in French: *renoi*].*" This song was the first from Damso in the frame of his collaboration with Booba and his label 92i. It was featured on Booba's *OKLM Mixtape Volume 1*,[303] and helped Damso begin to make a name for himself with the French audience and critics/commentators, notably through his mastery of the rap codes of the time, which were part of an explicitly "gangsta" style of rap: "*Behind bars, that's what I risk when I sell shnouf* [i.e., powdered drugs*] on weekdays/ So I stick to my checks,*[304] *like Snoop [Dogg]'s shirt in 'What's My Name'*." The song's chorus, and its hook-line, "*I always want more than I need*," captures the very essence of capitalist ideology and its never-ending quest for profit. At the end of 2015, Booba featured Damso and Gato da Bato, a Haitian rapper living in the US, on "Pinocchio" from his eighth solo album, *Nero Nemesis*. In his verse, Damso explicitly states his new connection with Booba, rapping: "*Brussels connection to Aulnay-sous-Bois,*" referring to the Paris municipality where Booba began rapping in the early 1990s.

This featuring with Booba would boost Damso's career thanks to the great visibility and very positive reception of the track among the audience. His debut album was released the following year via 92i and Capitol Music France. Entitled *Batterie faible* [*Low Battery*], the album was certified gold in France five months after its release and received a very good response from the audience and commentators. At this point, Damso was able to begin building a very solid and loyal fan base. The lead single from the album was "*Bruxelles Vie*" ["Brussels Life"], an ego-tripping way for Damso to describe his life in the city where he began practicing rap music: "*French rap K.O. in one feat./ Life."* The following lines can be noted: *"I only know one King and that's Martin Luther/ Childhood not quiet, gunshots I'm not afraid anymore*." Damso draws parallels between the BFS and the figure of Martin Luther King, and his own childhood marked

[303] This mixtape was a collective project bringing together young emerging artists linked to 92i at the time, aimed at giving them visibility. The OKLM brand, named after a 2015 Booba song, was also developed on radio and in blogs, and is today a French slang expression meaning "chill" (in French "OKLM" means literally "*au calme*").

[304] Damso makes here a play on words with the formulation "watching your steps," which literally translates in French by "*se tenir à carreau*," with "*carreau*" literally meaning "check" in English.

by armed conflicts in the DRC, some of the causes of which can be found in the postcolonial situation specific to this region. The song's video was shot entirely in Brussels and Damso is seen performing it in some of the city's best-known venues, such as the *Grand-Place*. In some shots he is alone, in others he is accompanied by people who we guess are close to him, like the rappers Shay and Siboy, who were also on Booba's 92i label.

Another guest feature with Booba was released the same year, "*Paris c'est loin*" ["Paris is far away"], in which Damso raps: "*Very early on, I experienced racism in primary school: 'Valérie was afraid of the Black [man]'/ But she didn't talk about light, words are blades that sharpen hatred and anger*." In an annotation he wrote on the Genius platform, Damso explains: "She really exists. I don't remember if her name was Valerie or Valentine, but it started with 'Val-'. She was a racist. She didn't like the color of my skin and let me know. There was already the word 'nigger [in French: *nègre*]' in her vocabulary back then. It was very early on."[305] These explanations from the rapper help to contextualize this line, which can then be put in parallel with the preceding considerations about (Afro)negrophobia.

A new interest and "effervescence on hip hop in Belgium" began in 2016, even though this interest was focused on the new generation of artists and not necessarily the pioneers, as highlighted by S. Mariano from Melodiggerz.[306] In 2017, the Brussels rapper Isha from Congolese origins released the first volume in a series of three EPs called *La vie augmente* [*Life Increases*]. Isha is well-known in the underground scene of Francophone Belgian rap for his lyrical skills and mastering of the codes of hip hop and he managed to distinguish himself in this new wave of Belgian rap. In "*L'augmentation, pt. 1*" ["The increase, pt. 1"], Isha begins his verse rapping: "*You hear the heartbeat/ There's no haters, my team, only blacks, whites, beurs/ And you see him in a perfecto, my babtou* [i.e., French slang for white people]*, *he looks like a crook/ You wonder why I call him 'nigga', it's because we've been through the same problems*." These lyrics are interesting for the analysis, as they demonstrate a certain reappropriation of the racial stigma by Isha in order to use it in a sense more relevant to him. For example, he refers to his white friend as a "nigga" because the latter had similar experiences of discrimination and exclusion, probably more related to classist issues than race. Joining Kendrick Lamar's perspective in "Fuck Your Ethnicity," Isha also seems to take an

[305] See *Genius*, "Paris c'est loin [Lyrics]."
[306] See *Drapeau Blanc TV* (2021), "'30 Years of records, l'exposition prévue en 2022' Sonny (Melodiggerz) extrait 2" (starting from 5:20).

intersectional approach by considering issues of social class in his thoughts. Evoking "the blacks, whites, *beurs* in his team," the rapper emphasizes the multicultural strength of his cultural environment.

In 2018, Isha released the second volume of *La vie augmente*, in which he raps the following on "*Justifié*" ["Justified"]: "*But do you realize?/ In the country [i.e., the DRC], the dead pile up/ You walk with corpses under your feet/ 'Independence cha cha', all summer long*." The rapper thus ironically denounces the situation in the homeland of his parents, referring to the song "*Indépendance cha cha*" by Congolese singer Gran Kallé (Joseph Kabasele) and the African Jazz Orchestra, which was first performed on June 30, 1960 in Brussels and became a sort of anthem of Congolese independence and one of the first popular songs of the new nation. The same year, Isha founded his own music label in the center of Brussels, Papa Shango, whose aim is "to develop young artists and musicians by providing them with the expertise they need to launch a career" (*IDLM* 2024c), which since 2021 has included access to a recording studio.

Still in 2018, Damso released his third album, and his last in the frame of his collaboration with Booba and 92i,[307] called *Lithopédion*. The critical and commercial success of this album was once again overwhelming, making Damso one of the most influential artists on the Francophone rap scene. The only single and music video promoting the album was the song "Smog," a fairly representative example of the rapper's subtle writing style and general artistic direction, making the listener dive into his introspective universe full of thoughts on human relationships and how he himself feels about it, framed by the aesthetic codes of gangsta rap. It is as close as possible to the street and some of those who are furthest from the dominant models of society, while embodying its darkest aspects in their own way. The following lyrics can be taken for analysis:

> *No direction, only know the arrow on my joint/ Motivation, son of a bitch blood on my laundry (son of a bitch)*
> *I know that song "dirty niggers go home"/ Five hundred euro note "dirty niggers welcome to our home" (welcome to our home)*
> *I'm not anymore in the hood, Castelo de São Jorge/ I'm smokin' a blunt, it's the violence, sore throat (headache)* […]

[307] Damso had signed a three-album contract with 92i, which he decided not to extend after the release of the third album. This decision, or, according to some interpretations, the way it was taken and announced, marked the start of a conflict with Booba, and the two artists are no longer on good terms, even though Damso has always publicly credited Booba for launching his professional career.

It's still Dems, nigga, no matter, it's still Dems (it's still him)/ Even in the broke we manage, tuna, pasta, fresh cream (yes I know)
It shoots at night, it shoots in the afternoon, it shoots the day (it's bang bang bang)/ So much war, my people are dead, who's next?
Yeah (yeah)

Damso speaks of his anger at a kind of double discourse against migrants of sub-Saharan origins ("dirty niggers")* who would be denied access to the territory if they do not have a high level of income. He goes on to explain that, even though he is now financially better off and no longer lives in the "hood," he never forgets where he came from or his war-affected childhood, a phenomenon he sees as repetitive when he asks who its next victims will be. The video was shot in Ukraine (as were many other Francophone rap music videos) to highlight some post-Soviet landmarks such as the statue of Mother Ukraine in Kiev. The idea was to transcribe a visual universe linked to the conquest of space to put into images the introspective journey that Damso proposes in his own universe (Bouquet 2022).

In 2019, the singer, rapper, model, and actress Lous and The Yakuza released "*Dilemme*" ["Dilemma"], her first solo single, through Columbia Records (Sony) with whom she signed a contract in 2018. Born in the DRC from Congolese and Rwandan parents, Lous and The Yakuza settled in Belgium in 2011 with her family at the age of 15. Her hip hop, R&B, and trap-tinged music is marked by powerful introspective lyrics and multiple cultural inspirations, making Lous and The Yakuza one of the most original artists of the new generation in Belgium. "*Dilemme*" is quite representative of her musical style at the time. We can observe the following lyrics for analysis: "*The more I hate them, the more I feel sorry for them/ My skin is not black, it is ebony color/ Lous, are you serene or just waging war?/ You're not perfect, your mistake remains human.*" These lyrics show how the singer reappropriates the founding particularism of the gesture of minorization in order to deconstruct the racialization that seeks to confine her to a minority group in a situation of domination. She also underscores the human nature of her own persona when she speaks to herself with reassurance of the faults she might commit. The music video demonstrates a highly refined, photographic aesthetic, in the service of an artistic direction intended to reflect the unique universe of Lous and the Yakuza. Camera presence, choreographies and gestures, lighting effects, as well as make-up, hairstyles, outfits and backdrops are all thought out.

In October 2020, Lous and The Yakuza released her first album called *Gore* [*Gory*]. One of the lead singles, "Solo," was released in March of the same year. The bridge of the song is particularly interesting for analysis: "*May God keep me from the path of vengeance/ To give them what they deserve is so tempting/ Do I have to scream to be heard?/ Six zero [1960] year of independence*." Both verses end with the same line: "*Why isn't black a color of the rainbow?*" and the hook-line is: "*Whatever we say, we will stay solo/ Whatever we do, we will stay solo*." During a 2022 interview with Didier Zacharie of *Le Soir*, the latter asked Lous and The Yakuza the following question about these lyrics referring to the Belgian colonial period in order to highlight its connections with contemporary racial injustice and discriminations: "It's a direct postcolonial discourse that contrasts with that of most artists today, who prefer to stay away from politics. Do you claim to be an engaged artist?" She answered:

> Yes, I think that by force of circumstance, my condition – because unfortunately, we still have to talk about the condition of a black woman – forces me to be politicized. I defend myself, I talk about what's happening to me and my community – what we still have to call community. In my heart, I'm a humanist, but society forces me to be communitarian. This is the tragedy of my life. I'd love to be a 26-year-old woman, making music and talk about what I ate in the morning, but I'm forced to write songs about racism because society forces me to. That's the paradox. I'm always asked: 'Are you an engaged artist?' But I have no choice! Or else I'm talking about things that don't concern me, about the life of someone I don't know. But I don't think people would care. For artists to make good music, it has to be rooted in reality. Me, I'd rather make albums that aren't called *Gory* (in Zacharie 2022: n.p.).

At the end of the interview, the journalist related these issues with "urban music":

> Damso explained to us a few years ago that when he arrived in Belgium, it was tough. In that sense, your story is a bit similar. But he also told us that things were changing, thanks in particular to the success of urban music, because 'urban life is about diversity, and it changes mentalities'. Would you agree?

Lous and The Yakuza replied:

> I prefer to call it hip-hop, but yes, it's mixed. There are all kinds of people who express themselves through hip-hop: blacks like Damso, Arabs like Hamza, whites like Roméo Elvis. Clearly, it's a bit more diverse than French song... And yet, I get the impression that people still see this music as secondary, even though it's the most popular. But it's true, I've met a lot of people who've told me: I used to be racist, but I'm not anymore. It's the power of music to change mentalities (in Zacharie 2022: n.p.).

During the same interview, she was asked about her involvement in the Belgian BLM movement:

> I've always spoken about racism and these issues with the same fervor, but suddenly I had a much bigger audience. It was the first time it had ever happened to me, that one of my messages had travelled so far and across the whole of Belgium to reach 20,000 people on the day of the demonstration. I couldn't believe it.

Regarding the issue of removing statues promoting colonization, she stated:

> I've talked about it a lot. The statues were made by artists. After all, we're all against the concept of Satan, but there are plenty of representations of the devil or monstrous characters. Violent representations have always existed. I'd rather put these statues in the museum with explanatory plaques, but as one young man rightly said on TV: 'In Germany, there's no Hitler statue or Hitler street'. That would be in such bad taste. But we live in bad taste. We're used to it. Lots of people say it's a thing of the past. For some, it may be in the past, but we're still living with the consequences of colonization (in Zacharie 2022: n.p.).

In "MEVTR,"[308] released a few months after the 2020 June protest of the Belgian BLM movement, Damso raps: "*Sticks in the wheels, okay (okay), knee on the neck, okay (okay)/ We broke the chains yesterday, today we break the silence (fuck [in English in the original lyrics], yeah),*" before concluding his verses with: "*Kid, I didn't need to have an affiliation, I just needed to make numbers* (*moula* [i.e., French slang for money])/ *My best friends are my apartments, I die, they'll be there for my son (oh yes, Dems).*" Damso would thus argue that capitalist economic emancipation and access to wealth would "break the chains," but without involving bringing the realities of racism to light, and that it is therefore time to "break the silence."

In "*Vie*" ["Life"], officially released in 2020 as part of Damso's fourth album, *QALF*,[309] he raps:

[308] The song's title is an anagram invented by Damso meaning "best of you all together" (in French: "*Meilleur d'Entre Vous Tous Réunis*"), a kind of synonym of the popular formulation "GOAT" for "greatest of all time."

[309] At the end of March 2020, Damso posted on his YouTube channel this unreleased song paying tribute to one of his aunts who had died of coronavirus and to confirm the upcoming release of his fourth album, which he had postponed to take care of his hospitalized mother in 2019. The song was released without teasing and without a title in the classical sense of the word, but with a symbol well known to those who follow the rapper's news. This symbol, 🖖, a hand that makes the letter V with four fingers, signifies "*The Vie*" (The Life) and is very often used by Damso in his diverse visual artworks and in the gestures he adopts on stage or in his videos, making it a full rallying sign for his community or people working with him. Today, the song is available as "Intro" on the 2023 reissue of the *QALF* album, under the title *QALF Infinity* (also the title of the 2021 reissue).

Fake niggas lack hygiene, always squatting the station, bailiffs at noon/ The mama is proud now
notaries take selfies, I open SP [i.e., private societies] without making credit
Now notaries take selfies, now mayors take selfies/ But where were they when I wanted the papers
[i.e., document of nationality or residence on the Belgian territory]?
Ah well yeah/ I had to believe them but without believing it, rolling blunts in the audience
Black hourglass of despair, in the memory from the station to the glory

In the pre-chorus and chorus he sings: "*Eh, the life of a bandit/ The heavy sentences and the tears, frightened mama [X2]/ It's not my life, it's not mine/ Why do they always want me to make a mess? [X2]/ Frightened mama*." With these lyrics, Damso explains that the financial situation he is now experiencing makes his mother proud of him, and that the notoriety he has acquired in the Belgian cultural landscape would even lead to notaries and lawyers wanting to take a photo with him, instead of sending bailiffs to his home. The rapper seems to be amused by this, the irony of which is made explicit when he wonders where the "mayors"[310] were when he wanted to get the documents to stay in Belgium. He continues this brief account of his migration journey by explaining that he had no choice but to wait and believe what he was told while having no hope in this regard. He finishes his verse by summing it up using a basic figure of mobility and waiting/expecting ("the station"), recalling that he came from poverty and precariousness as a refugee from the DRC and that he is now considered a person of financial wealth and great public notoriety ("the glory").

The pre-chorus and chorus appear to encapsulate the reminiscence of a time when he was involved in a life of crime and its potential repercussions. However, he asserts that this is not the life he desires, questioning why "they" are urging him to "make a mess," embracing a criminal lifestyle. The use of "they" here may thus be understood as related to people representing barriers that society would have placed against him, leading him to involvement in criminal activities. The musicality of the song, articulated around minor harmonies both in the instrumental composition and in Damso's way of rapping and singing, creates a sad mood, reinforcing the interpretation of the lyrics. "The life of a bandit" and "making mess" would be all but what Damso really wants and would be explained by some choices he considers he was forced to make. As he explains in the same way that he experienced poverty and precariousness, we may assume that when he is rapping "*it's not my life, it's not mine*," Damso is also claiming

[310] This word seems in the context to represent public authorities generally.

that he does not want to live a life in precarious conditions, which may also explain why he would have chosen to engage in criminal activities.

In 2020, the French rapper Kalash Criminel, from Congolese origins, released "*But en or*" ["Golden Goal"] featuring Damso. The song was released a few months after the murder of George Floyd and others of African origin in the US and elsewhere in the West, including France. In this context, the song is thematic and directly addresses racism and racial discrimination, police brutality, Black Power, Black Lives Matter, and colonialism related to the DRC and its current situation, as shown by this verse from Damso:

Kalash Crimi', Dems, some "nasty" [i.e., producing some "good shit"] *with or without melanin, ah ah/ My shy heart bleeds, I hurt, my pain in a few lines, ah ah*
Armed rebels stain my memories, bullet residue perforating the walls/ These sinister days violate souls, are lost in minefields, ah ah
Piou, ratata bang, welcome to the jungle [in English in the original lyrics] *(eh)/ We went from Black Power to Black, Black Lives Matter (ouh)*
Why do you scream for help? African never prostrate yourself, no no/ Stand up, who will stop us?
Show me that one letter to the King, bah yes (bah yes), the colonies have dirtied us (dirtied)/ The missionaries promised us (promised) that gold would be worth less than our lives (our lives)
Twelve million deaths later, we talk about debts and credits (credits)/ "Antwerp hands", some niggerheads, human zoo, April 58 (oh lala)

Damso begins his verse by shouting out for Kalash Criminel, stating that his albinism does not hinder his talent for producing some "good shit" music. In this context, the main idea of the French slang "*faire du sale*," or in a Damso's Booba-inspired style, "*le saal*" ["the nasty"], might be transposed into English with the meaning of carrying out a work, a creation, with determination and maximum efficiency. In concrete terms, this can mean outperforming the competition, working on a song that you really like, or giving a great live performance. This positively connoted slang term from contemporary youth that many rappers have taken up seems to have a particular importance in Damso's writing. He uses it often as a hook in many of his lyrics and it can also be put in perspective with another of his hooks, "*le nwaar*" ["the dark"]. Damso's overall artistic work seems to be tinged with an identity quest that he structures around two characters: himself, William Kalubi, and his alter ego, "Damso." The "*saal*" and "*nwaar*" hooks would be used by the artist to indicate to the listener whether William Kalubi or Damso is speaking and rapping/singing (*Backpackerz* 2018; *Genius* 2020). The title of

Damso's latest album (2024), which would hardly be considered a rap album, *J'ai menti* [*I Lied*], is possibly a reference to the title of the song that launched his career in 2015, the featured track with Booba entitled "Pinocchio."

When Damso states that no matter what color Kalash Criminel's skin is, they are going to do the shit, this can be interpreted as a way of denouncing the specific discrimination faced by people with albinism. Similarly, Kalash Criminel concludes the chorus with these lyrics: "*Scarcity is wealth (woaw), you didn't know I'm telling you (hey)/They make fun of my albinism (hey) but that's what makes me strong (tatata).*" After having valued his partner and the work they are doing on the track, Damso begins his verse by recalling childhood in the DRC in the 1990s. He talks about the reality of armed conflicts in that region and evocates the pain and trauma that it caused him.

Damso then speaks explicitly about the events of 2020 in relation to the growing visibility of movements and actions linked to BLM. An interesting point to highlight is that Damso seems to not fully recognize himself in the BLM movement. Indeed, as a commentator on the Genius platform notes, the statement "we passed from Black Power to BLM" can be linked to a brief communication release from Kemi Seba, a pan-African activist, author, and political commentator who had dealings with the French justice system (notably for "incitement to racial hatred," for which he was acquitted) before moving to West Africa. Seba, "whose activism may have been controversial" (Tijani 2021: n.p.), has been long considered a black supremacist but now explains that he has evolved from this ideological stance. Contrary to the religious approach of the Nation of Islam, of whose French branch he was a member in his youth, he no longer believes that "the white man is the devil" (Bamba 2008: n.p.). In a press release about the BLM, Seba concludes by saying: "We went from Black Power (black self-determination) to Black Lives Matter ('Hey white people, black lives matter'), ask yourself some questions."[311]

During a visit to Paris in June 2020, Seba explained in a press conference the stance of his organization (*Urgences Panafricanistes20*) regarding BLM. After stating that his organization stands "in solidarity ad vitam aeternam with all of those, all of our brothers and sisters, who fight against systemic negrophobia and against the police blunders to which we are subjected […] all of those who mobilize against these police brutalities," he explained that, in his view,

[311] See *Senegal7* (2020), "Kemi Seba au sujet de Black Lives Matter."

"there are many Afrodescendents and Africans who do not feel concerned or represented by this 'Black Lives Matter' terminology."[312] He continues by saying that at the emergence of the BLM as a statement of love and pride internal to the African American web community and advocating for social justice, he considered it to be meaningful and relevant. However, he considers that the BLM is nowadays a "neoliberal instrumentalization of black suffering,"[313] reducing those who recognize themselves in it to the level of beggars begging for humanity. Presented in this way, BLM would be in opposition to the Black Power doctrine developed during the late 1960s in the US, whose motto is self-determination and democratic access to political power. Thus, according to Seba, BLM would no longer be an effective and relevant way of fighting racism and promoting social justice and would be a step backwards.

Aware that Seba is a well-known figure to those interested in pan-African, African issues, and racism against black people, and that he often came to Brussels for events in collaboration with various not-for-profit organizations, it is probable that Damso may share certain of his views when he raps: "*Why do you scream for help? African never prostrate yourself, no no/ Stand up, who will stop us?"* He does this just after highlighting that BLM is the most used terminology related to negrophobia. It seems that he may agree with Seba's view and would therefore encourage black people to make a more explicit claim to self-determination.

Damso's next lyrics contain interesting statements directly related to Belgian postcolonial memory, such as "*the colonies have dirtied us (dirtied)/The missionaries promised us (promised) that gold would be worth less than our lives (our lives)/ Twelve million deaths later, we talk about debts and credits (credits).*" These lines may refer to certain mechanisms by which the missionaries of the colonial system succeeded in claiming the legal and/or customary validity of treaties and other agreements supposedly negotiated with the rulers of the colonized territories after the Berlin Conference. The deaths of 12 million evocated by the rapper refers certainly to certain accounts of the death toll that the exploitation of the resources of the country through forms of slavery caused during that time, driving some analysts to speak about genocide (Hérard 2015). When Damso talks about debts and credits, a certain irony could be detected if one considers that he is referring to the economic situation of most African countries that have

[312] See *Mediapac TV* (2020), "Kémi Séba critique le mouvement Black Lives Matter" (starting from 1:25).
[313] See *Mediapac TV* (2020), "Kémi Séba critique le mouvement Black Lives Matter" (starting from 4:50).

contracted debts according to the current standards established by international organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank.

The reference to "human zoo" in the last line can be specifically related to the statement "the colonies have dirtied us." One of the most important productions of colonial propaganda was the organization of "human zoos," or "colonial ethnographic exhibitions," as these events were called at the time, from the early 19th century onwards. It was a matter of "constructing a spectacular device to challenge the humanity of those being exhibited" (Thuram 2016: 7), men, women, and children presented as "savages" (Etambala 1993: 218–220; Matos et al. 2022). By the end of the 19th century, these exhibitions and their media coverage had already imposed and fixed in people's minds representations of "non-white" populations as "savage" and "primitive," needing to be "civilized." Mass spectacles, these human zoos played a major role in making race a shared model for explaining the world, imprinting in the collective unconscious the idea that there were indeed several "human races" that could be classified and hierarchized, thus contributing to the "discourse necessary to legitimize colonization and the exploitation of the men and raw materials of the colonies" (Thuram 2016: 8). After the first "colonial ethnographic exhibition" organized in Belgium in 1885, another took place in 1894, still Antwerp, in which 144 Congolese people were placed in an "exotic" setting designed to frame the imaginary of visitors. Eight of them died. In 1897, during the "international exhibition in Brussels," 267 Congolese were taken by force to Belgium to be exhibited in three villages installed in the municipality of Tervuren in Brussels. Several died (*Africa Museum* 2020). This event would influence Leopold II's decision to build a propaganda museum about his projects in the Congo, the "Congo Museum" (then the "Royal Museum of Central Africa" and nowadays the "Africa Museum") ,where he would "highlight his commercial adventure, for which resource extraction was the primary motivation [and] which resulted in the brutal subjugation of the Congolese" (Vallet 2018: 102).

The most notorious exhibition in Belgium was the 1958 Brussels World's Fair from April to October. Also known as "Expo 58," or "April 58" as Damso raps it, this event presented a "negro village" from Congo (*RTBF* 2018), where 120 Congolese were exhibited each day (from a total of 600 deported in Belgium): "The exhibition space reserved for the Congo was enormous. It was a question of Belgium promoting its achievements and justifying its presence in the Congo, even as the echoes of independence resounded" (*Africa Museum* 2020: n.p.). Visiting these human zoo villages, some spectators adopted racist and humiliating behaviors by

throwing bananas at the Congolese or by insulting them. Most of the Congolese who participated decided to boycott these villages and to return to the Congo, where independence was declared two years later in total haste and without any preparation by the Belgian colonial power. Mentioning these events at the end of a verse directly discussing racism and colonization allows Damso to highlight their importance in Belgian postcolonial collective memories.

The last line also contains two other references to Belgian colonial history, in the field of culinary arts (baking). Indeed, "niggerheads" are a well-known pastry technically called "chocolate-coated marshmallow treats" and sold in all supermarkets under various names and brands to avoid using its racist appellation. Among the most notable cities in Belgium is Antwerp, a town in Flanders that some consider the symbolic capital of the Flemish region. One of the city's best-known culinary specialties is called "Antwerp hands," and seems to refer both to the city's history and to Belgium's colonial history. Indeed, Antwerp's folklore is linked to the mythology of Silvius Brabo, a legend recounting how this Roman soldier killed the giant Druon Antigone in Antwerp because the latter demanded a right of way from people wishing to cross the Scheldt[314] and cut off the hands of those who did not pay. This explains why a statue of Silvius Brabo throwing away Antigone's hand is located on Antwerp's *Grand-Place*, in front of the city hall.[315] It was in the 1930s, following a pastry-making competition, that the "Antwerp hands" began to be turned into a series of pastries and chocolates, becoming one of the city's best-known tourist souvenirs.

This was also the era of the "Belgian Congo," which succeeded the "Congo Free State" from 1908, this latter being also linked to the image of severed hands. Indeed, while this image "symbolizes the triumph of the Flemish spirit over a maniacal giant," it also represents "a sinister reminder of the brutality enacted upon Central Africans during Belgian colonial rule," as "Congolese hands were systematically amputated when enslaved Africans failed to meet quotas for extracting rubber. Belgian colonists collected and smoked these severed hands to preserve them for later counting and recording. The process was so widespread that the Congolese believed Belgians harbored an insatiable appetite for African hands" (Folsom 2016: 65). Damso evokes then this reference to attest to his link with a racist imaginary fueled by colonial practices now considered inhumane. This reminder from the artist seems pertinent in a

[314] A river flowing through northern France, western Belgium, and south-western Netherlands before flowing into the North Sea.
[315] The etymology of Antwerp comes from the Dutch words "*hand*" and "*werpen*," meaning "hand" and "throw."

context where Belgian colonizers "strategically separate past from present in offering up carefully parceled bits of history to evoke pride, rather than shame." In this way, one would assume that avoiding connecting "the chocolate hands with severed Congolese hands is not the result of collective forgetting, per se, but of studiously compartmentalizing historical events into separate spaces" (Folsom 2016: 65).

The music video for "*But en or*" shows several elements interesting to highlight here. Firstly, a black ballet dancer is featured throughout to emphasize the beauty and elegance of the choreography she performs, thus deconstructing stereotypes associating black bodies with bestiality. Throughout, several albino people are highlighted, from a toddler to an elderly woman, wearing a sweater with "savagery" written on it—the brand of Kalash Criminel. The latter wears several garments during the video intended to denounce war crimes in the DRC. During his verse, he raps: "*Me I think about it every moment, (about) our ancestors in the cotton fields/ Of course I'm not happy (tatata), my country's being killed for cotton*." We see a black man holding a cotton stalk, then another black man who appears to be a supermarket worker, as if to represent racial discrimination in the job market and its potential link to the period of slavery and colonization. Then, in several shots, we see a person dressed as a policeman acting like a string puppet, probably to suggest that the forces of law and order are not immune to establishment manipulations. During Damso's verse, the latter adopts a specific gesture during the line about Black Power and BLM. When the word "power" appears on-screen before exploding, Damso throws a series of punches as he pronounces the words "Black Lives Matter," which also appear on-screen, while Kalash Criminel stands behind him with his fist raised. The video ends with a scene in which Kalash Criminel is seen giving a ski mask (the distinctive visual marker of his artistic persona) to an albino child and putting it on with a certain solemnity, while Damso holds another albino toddler/baby in his arms in other final shots. These shots featuring children can be interpreted as signifying the passing on of the fight against forms of racism to future generations.

At the end of 2020, Indocile collaborated with other artists based in Liège, Mr. Clasik and Marù, to produce a song addressing racism-related issues in the context of the Belgian BLM movement. Entitled "Hope," it was published on YouTube by Nectar with a lyrics video. The following lyrics can be selected for analysis: "*No one can write your history better than you can/ Whitewashing history to the max [...] Wealthy vs. minority [...] Monkey cries in the stands [...] Noise and smell at the neighbor's house/ They dream of a puritanical white country*." These

lyrics denounce racism and certain negrophobic stereotypes, as well as postcolonial memories instrumentalized for political ends.

These analyses of recent politically charged artistic mobilizations around issues of contemporary racism and racial discrimination, as well as postcolonial collective memories in Francophone Belgium, allow us to re-emphasize the relevance of the notion of negritude in understanding these forms of artistic engagement. Indeed, the circulation, impregnation, and mobilization of collective memories of racial discrimination contribute to the construction of what Césaire (2004: 89–90) called "identity," rather than "ethnicity," to explicitly emphasize the socially constructed nature of this identity founded as a rampart against racism:

> I'm thinking of an identity that is not archaizing, devouring itself, but devouring the world, in other words, taking over the present to better re-evaluate the past and, even more so, to prepare for the future. After all, how can we measure how far we have come if we do not know where we have come from or where we want to go? Think about it. Senghor and I fought hard against deculturation and acculturation. Well, I say that to turn our backs on identity is to return to it, and to surrender ourselves helplessly to a word that still has its value; it's to surrender ourselves to alienation.

He insists: "I see that some people question Negritude from time to time. But, in truth, it's not Negritude that is in question today. It's racism; it's the resurgence of racism throughout the world; it's the hotbeds of racism that are being rekindled here and there" (ibid.: 90). In the analysis presented here, this search for identity is embodied in the practice of rap music and hip hop culture, challenging then dominant narratives about Belgium's colonial period and aiming to "revolt against the idea of an infinite past" (Mertens et al. 2013: 108), to deconstruct stereotypes of (Afro)negrophobia and fight contemporary racism. In this way, hip hop appears effectively as a third space where multiple and various experiences of deep discrimination feed a narrative of contestation of oppressive dominant models and another of (re)creation to implement various strategies dealing with these dominant models.

At the end of 2021, AMB'N released a mixtape called *CNTRST* [Contrast] realized in my home studio and that of Hopium Beatz during two years of live performance (in the context of the coronavirus pandemic) aimed at testing potential selections for the mixtape with the audience. After its release, we continued to play concerts, culminating in a performance at the 2022 *Les Ardentes* urban music festival in Liège, on a small stage reserved for local artists, as well as at the Reflektor in 2023, one of the main concert halls in Liège. In 2023, we also performed a one-

hour music live show during a program on the local television station in Liège, as well as a radio show on the station Tarmac in Brussels for the promotion of upcoming songs. These opportunities was given to us by Kaer, who had attended several of our concerts and subsequently offered to book us for other important concerts in Liège. We also did stage coaching with him to improve the technique and professionalism of our performance.[316] In this context, we shared with him the next songs we were about to release, and he proposed being the publisher of these singles for release on music DSPs [demand-side platforms for music services]. Since then,[317] we have released four singles out of the five planned.[318]

In the 2021 mixtape, Prophesy, one of the group's two rappers, sang "*Vénal*" ["Venal"], which I had composed, recorded, and mixed. This is a solo song by Prophesy, who wrote the lyrics before the making of the instrumental, contrary to our usual working method. This song can be interpreted as a denunciation of hyper-materialism and hyper-individualism, in a context of globalized capitalism and endless quest for money: "*I pray the sky to forgive what we have become/ Since we only pursue gain (moula, money, dinero [money in Spanish])/ Obsessed with material (shit), for a few brightly colored bills/ In the blood we bathe (bang, bang).*"

In the first verse, Prophesy puts himself in the place of a wealthy person who would be very materialistic and focused exclusively on himself and the success of his personal projects, as the following extract shows:

My motto is 'Me, Myself and I' [in English in the original lyrics]*/ Fuck the world and its suffering, I focus on my stuffs (I focus on my stuffs)*
I don't give a fuck about your wars and diseases, I'm going green and enjoying my life/ View on the playa [beach in Spanish]*, VIP lounge*
20 [km per] hour aboard a [car] prototype.

The chorus clearly illustrates the stance of this character when stating: "*Nigga me* [in English in the original lyrics], *it's everyone for himself, so 'Me, Myself and I'*." The second verse

[316] Kaer has developed a stage coaching activity, among other projects related to hip hop and urban cultures and is recognized for his quality among developing and established artists.
[317] Unfortunately, we decided to put on hold the activity of the group due to a personal emergency for one of the members, while still creating music waiting for release.
[318] The singles are "Crew" (featuring Kurosawa) (2023), "*Ça ira*" ["It'll Be Fine"] (2024), "What Up Boy" (featuring Kurosawa) (2024), and "*S'en aller*" ["Go Away"] (2025).

provides more nuance to what might justify the posture denounced. It also exposes certain stances claiming to be altruistic activism on issues of social justice or world peace but that would, in fact, be based on self-interested calculation. The song's bridge introduces this second verse as follows: "*I repeat it's 'Me, Myself and I'/ Fuck the world and its suffering, me I focus on my stuffs/ You think you're an activist? You have a Black Fist t-shirt (yeah)/ But you've never made sacrifices that are not for your own benefit (no)*." The verse begins:

So calla te la boca ["shut your mouth", in Spanish in the original lyrics] *(shh), don't come moralizing to me/ On your fucking pedestal sipping Coca-Cola*
Go and take on the merchants of death who profit from the miseries of war […] You identify with the drama of the moment: 'Am I the most publicized?'
Sometimes Panamanian, sometimes Kenyan, you post [on social media], *you're not there to protest/ Virtual activism (hey, hey) like all your life (bitch* [in English in the original lyrics]*)*
Perpetual illusion (hey, hey) for good reviews [on social media] *(check).*

This song is thus about denouncing a constant quest for profit, and a sort of inward-looking attitude to avoid facing up to the realities of the world. This quest for profit is understood as a societal model that is very difficult to deconstruct. Finally, the song also highlights altruistic activist rhetoric that may in fact be a cover for some kind of quest for profit and self-interest.

One last song released in 2020 by the Brussels rapper Frenetik can be selected for analysis here. Called "*Infrarouge*" ["Infrared"], it was performed by Frenetik on the Colors platform[319] on the same day as its release on music DSPs. It was published by the Brussels label Jeunes Boss and the Parisian label Blue Sky (part of Epic Records, a division of Sony). The quality of the song and the performance received unanimous critical acclaim, giving Frenetik, who had released his first official songs the previous year, good promotion. The end of the first verse is interesting for analysis: "*Obliged to show them that we can be rude, here everything is black so laws are abolished/ Cold looks symbolize the knee on the neck of the judge and the police*." The lyrics sound like a kind of warning to the institutions that are supposed to guarantee the rule of law in a society that claims to adhere to this concept. Indeed, the rapper seems to imply that laws are not respected when they are supposed to apply to people of sub-Saharan origin, forcing these same people to demonstrate "rudeness" and thus not respecting certain social norms. Paralleling such a situation with the central aspect of the definition of the political entity known as the

[319] Colors is a music streaming platform that puts the spotlight on emerging, developing, and established artists by giving them the opportunity to perform a song that will be broadcast to the Colors community. The platform has had a major impact on many Francophone artists, such as Isha, Lous and The Yakuza, and Frenetik.

state—the monopoly of legitimate physical violence—might then provide a better understanding of Frenetik's perspective on the matter. If the state is the only entity authorized to use force and violence over a certain territory, its use must be controlled and monitored by the population. This is what the philosopher Hannah Arendt (2007 [1957]: 64) underlines when she writes that "what we mean today by constitutional government [...] is a government essentially limited in its authority and in the use of its force, a government under the control of the governed." Therefore, if it turns out in many respects that this control of state power cannot be exercised by those to whom it applies, the legitimacy of this power could be "legitimately" questioned.

During a 2020 interview with the media Check, Frenetik was asked: "When you think of George Floyd in the United States, Adama Traoré in France, and so many other cases, what does it awaken in you? As a young black man in Brussels, how do you live with this reality?" To which he replied:

> In a text I wrote not long ago, I said: 'They've been waiting for blunders and settling of scores to realize that black lives have always counted'. You see, what's going on today I think is there for all to see, but for most of us it's a reality that has always existed in everyday life. Whether it's at school, at work, in the street with the police, with institutions, all the time. It's a battle we live with every day, and one we can't let go of, because it's our lives. So it's good that everyone's talking about it, but we mustn't let people talk about it as if it were something new or just a trend" (Vachiery 2020: n.p.).

These thoughts are then to be paralleled with the huge visibility of the BLM movement in recent years. Frenetik joins Achille Mbembe and others, who asked the question of what concrete political consequences would the BLM movement have on the public resurgence of racism and postcolonial issues. During a 2021 interview with Gilles M., a Liège musician, the latter was quite critical of the BLM, echoing Damso's perspective about it on "*But en or*": "It's a pseudo revolt that isn't really one […] It's about sensationalizing things, events, then turning them into a movement and then capitalizing on this movement [...] There's no quest for power in this thing, it's victimization first [...] they're playing on a trick to sell stuffs" (2021: n.p.).

At the end of this empirical analysis, it appears that Belgian Francophone hip hop culture and rap music are placed "de facto in a political field," by their approach, their history, and their environment, as well as their lyrics "pointed in the direction of social inequalities, wars, cultural exclusions and oppressions." If the hip hop movement can be considered "anti-racist," and has

proved this on many occasions, it is first and foremost a "culture," "a universe of knowledge, reference and techniques" (Lapiower 1997: 275). Contestation of social and racial order has been at the heart of this culture from its emergence to the present day. Nevertheless, certain recent developments in globalized rap music, whether Anglophone or Francophone, have led some to fear that the protest potential of hip hop is being diluted, either annihilated or instrumentalized by the practices of a music industry governed by a neoliberal, consumerist approach, whose sole aim is the endless enrichment of a few individuals and the major music labels monopolizing the globalized commercial publishing and promotion of rap music.

This point was raised by Aliou Baldé (CMCLD 2023: n.p.) during our interview:

> One of the dangers of rap is that there are industries behind it. In other words, rap used to denounce its political reality and its environment. Today, it's glorified [...] that can be good too, but you have to politicize it, and that's the danger of capitalism in general [to avoid politicization], which has already conquered a good part of rap. But we need to be able to address these issues in a healthy way with young people.

This argument is also defended by the Francophone Belgian rapper Furio (Nicolas Canta). At the beginning of 2022, he gave a conference speech at the Eden (Charleroi's cultural center), entitled "Rapitalism," which I attended. The speech dealt with "how from […] a poor and rebellious youth, the message of 'popular' rap is increasingly similar to the dominant capitalist ideology."[320] The aim was to reflect on a certain shift in the general message conveyed by rap music since its integration into the global capitalist music industry, a message that could be summed up as "making money." This shift was also mentioned by Lapiower (2017: n.p.) during our interview, while qualifying certain expectations formulated regarding the hip hop movement before these artistic disciplines gained autonomy and became independent of each other through their integration into various economic markets:

> We have to add nuance, because there's been a misunderstanding about that. For years, too many people expected hip hop to be a political interlocutor, which it never was, and it had no desire to be. But there was a real social conscience, even if it was rather diluted, there was a kind of conscience, a mission, a mission of emancipation, a mission to make sense, to, as we used to say in hip hop, to transform the negative into the positive. So, for me, that means becoming an actor instead of a toy. And all this was very strong up to a certain point, which was the turning point.

[320] See *Eden* (2022), "Rapitalisme."

These developments on the evolution of hip hop and rap music and its less explicit socially conscious aspect, even circuitous, since their transformation into a commodified product, also shed light on the way in which "new cultures of protest" can be integrated into "established culture," understood as "a permanent remodeling, conditioned by the constantly renewed contributions of various new cultures, to which the established order initially remains heavily deaf and blind" (Lapiower 1997: 276). If rap music appears today in Francophone Belgium, as elsewhere, to be increasingly about entertainment rather than protesting or formulating sociopolitical critical messages, it is also because, after more than 50 years of existence, rap has well and truly become a popular cultural and commercial product.

Section 3

Theoretical feedback (2008-2021): Sharing postcolonial experiences in the new configuration of the Francophone Belgian rap music art world: "Urban cultures", commodification, and the narrative of resistance

The last part of the chronological empirical analysis (2008–2021) highlights the emergence of a new generation of hip hop artists and corresponds to the consecration of Francophone Belgian rap in the music industry, as well as its recognition as popular culture in the public sphere. Regarding the youth cultural policy in Francophone Belgium, the analysis confirms the decisive role played by street-level bureaucrats in the uses of hip hop arts and culture for this field of state action, and, consequently, in its institutionalization through this process. Furthermore, the analysis shows how an organization such as Nectar, created by hip hop artists and whose main purpose is to contribute to the professional development of hip hop in Francophone Belgium, has been able to adopt the operating codes of the youth cultural policy and sociocultural action. This situation raises then questionings about the actual capacity of such a public cultural action to recognize and fully integrate "urban cultures" into the scope of its claimed-ideal of cultural democracy.

Due to the democratization of the legal and illegal use of new digital technologies for consuming music, the global music industry experienced a major crisis starting with a massive decline in CD sales. In a relatively (very) limited music market such as Francophone Belgium, and at a time when Belgian rap music was experiencing the limits of its institutionalization by cultural policies and those of its commodification in the pre-Web 2.0 music industry, this reconfiguration will greatly benefit rap music artists. They have been able to integrate quickly

these new technologies into promotion and distribution practices developed within their art world. Furthermore, from the 2010s onwards, this period marks another significant shift with the emergence of specialized organizations and/or media integrated in the art world of Francophone Belgian rap music and committed to professionalize it by providing artist support and promotion, as well as booking and concert production services.

This situation will then accelerate the integration of Francophone Belgian rap music into the music market and, consequently, its recognition in the country as a popular cultural good with commercial value. In this context, issues and fears about the dilution of rap music's explicitly "political" message in a simple and exclusive quest for profit will begin to have an impact on Francophone Belgian rap. Nevertheless, the empirical analysis shows how certain artists will continue to participate in the debate and raise awareness about racism and its consequences by sharing various postcolonial experiences staged with music. In a context of revived postcolonial debate, illustrated notably by the Belgian BLM movement in the 2020s, these examples show how the hip hop culture narrative of resistance, when applied to postcolonial experiences specific to Francophone Belgium, can serve commercial purposes. Achieving such purposes could then facilitate the broad dissemination of the sociopolitical critical discourses and messages from this same narrative, while allowing certain artists to reach financial autonomy thanks to various activities related to their artworks.

General conclusions

Formulating “conclusions” about an investigation that started long before I officially entered the doctoral program and that is far from over is no easy task. Nevertheless, having enthusiastically decided to lend myself to an exercise that I consider to be that of “hip hop scholar” within this specific framework, the final part of the research work is dedicated to its conclusions. These rely on and incorporate elements developed in the two theoretical feedbacks following the analysis of the periods 1984–1992 and 1993–2007.

Seeking to identify a political dimension to Francophone Belgian rap music, I first placed it in the context of the history of hip hop in the US to highlight its postcolonial framing and to see if and how the latter would play a role in the reception and appropriation of hip hop in Francophone Belgium. In doing so, glocalization dynamics and processes could be considered in order to give the chronological analysis its starting point from the emergence of the hip hop movement in Belgium and the beginning of the globalization of hip hop culture and its artistic disciplines. The chronological approach, focusing on the nerve centers of hip hop in Francophone Belgium, the cities and urban areas of Brussels and Liège, made it possible to identify the main historical developments in the evolution of Francophone Belgian rap music and to structure the field analysis around three interdependent angles studied in a transversal way: the forms of mobilization and artistic expression dealing with racism and related issues; the responses of certain cultural public policies to the emergence and development of hip hop; the state of professionalization and commodification of rap music in Francophone Belgium. This fieldwork was also enriched and challenged by my own insider experience and by a back-and-forth approach involving triangulation of field data, delineation and operationalization of theoretical perspectives, and methodological considerations. I then formulated the answers to the hypothesis and the central research question to identify and explain the political positions and attitudes of Francophone Belgian rap music towards the persistence of racism nowadays, the construction of race relations, and, more generally, inequalities and social justice in Francophone Belgium and elsewhere.

The empirical analyses of the use of hip hop culture and rap music to meet the objectives of the sociocultural action aimed at young people in Francophone Belgium, and considering the urban areas of Liège and Brussels, have highlighted several elements arising from these political

mobilizations of the social function of popular artistic practices that have now become mainstream. Firstly, the historical analysis of the emergence of the youth cultural policy and its "sociocultural" ambitions highlighted the main reasons why the Youth Sector and the YCs embodying it responded quickly to the arrival of hip hop in Francophone Belgium, positioning themselves as the predominant public institutions to welcome this movement. With hip hop being interpreted as a group of artistic and cultural expressions of narrated and figurative resistance to dominant oppressive models, it has been considered relevant tools for meeting the broad ambition of the youth cultural policy and sociocultural action.

In line with certain findings of research and empirical studies about "hip hop based education," hip hop appeared for implementing agents of this state action as a relevant framework informing about youth sociocultural identity formation processes. In Francophone Belgium, the idea that hip hop can serve as an alternative space of education outside the traditional school system seems verified. Linking this with the general motivations of both the youth cultural policy and its implementing agents in Francophone Belgium, namely fighting social exclusion and inequalities by offering young people means of action with which they can identify, the street-level bureaucracy model helped identify insights about how implementing agents could mobilize substantial discretion to foster the use of hip hop for public action, and how hip hop artists could themselves negotiate the development of their artistic practices within this framework, both having then a concrete policymaking role when institutionalizing hip hop for state cultural action.

While highlighting certain conditions for the recognition of hip hop and rap music in the public policy sectors concerned, the chronological empirical analyses show that even though hip hop in Belgium has gain much more legitimacy, a lot of rap artists are still committed to work on making their artistic practice professionalized and fully recognized. In addition, aiming to integrate "urban cultures" into the realization of cultural democracy would be a matter of conceiving culture as a flexible and dynamic system, emphasizing the ability and creativity of individuals to actively modify and transform their cultural environment over time. In this context and more generally speaking, contemporary analyses of cultural policies in Francophone Belgium agree on the relative failure of cultural democracy, which has not succeeded in deconstructing and overcoming the hierarchies established between different cultural practices and the illegitimacy imposed on some of them. Certain forms of expression could not yet find full recognition and receptiveness in public measures supposed to be open to

marginalized or ignored cultural practices, raising then questions about the ability of public cultural action to adapt to contemporary and ongoing developments in the realm of the arts and culture in Francophone Belgium. While this discussion goes beyond the scope of this research, it seems that certain strategies implemented by the hip hop artists mentioned in the analysis to enable the development of their artistic practice may to some degree have attempted to bridge these gaps to force recognition and pursue the evolution and professionalization of rap music in Francophone Belgium.

Finally, it appears that the (utopian?) purpose of achieving cultural democracy could be helped by postcolonial and decolonial perspectives, as these notions share common interest in deconstructing oppressive and discriminatory hierarchies between human beings. For example, the notion of CRACS could be revitalized and updated by putting it into perspective with postcolonial and decolonial thinking and approaches concerning dynamics of alienation, stigmatization, and dehumanization. This perspective could then provide keys and avenues of reflection to encourage the appropriation of this notion by the target group it is supposed to concern, to avoid the pitfalls of paternalism and heteronomy. Indeed, one way appearing relevant to avoid the reproduction of coloniality of such projects and tools intended to shift the balance of power and privileges between different socially constructed groups of people in a given society is to involve those who directly experience it on an equal footing in their design, implementation, development, and evaluation.

Regarding artistic forms of mobilizations and expressions against racism, the cross-sectional data analysis shows first how the socially conscious approach of hip hop culture historically anchored in Francophone Belgian rap music is mobilized to challenge and to participate in the postcolonial debate and narrative in Belgium. In this view, sociopolitical concepts such as "negritude" or "Afropeanity" can be highlighted and paralleled with features of a kind of "global hip hop state of mind" related to "blackness" and "black music," leading certain artists to engage in protest, contestation, or debunking of dominant and oppressive societal models, powers, and establishments. The processes of hip hop cultural identity formation carry with them a certain political dimension, which, in the case of Francophone Belgium, can enable rap music artists to participate in the postcolonial debate by contesting and deconstructing a multitude of aspects linked to the phenomenon of racism and racial discrimination. In so doing and considering the new status of Francophone Belgian rap as a commodified and potentially widely-listened-to music, a space for dialogue is created between artists and their listeners,

which could at the very least enable the sharing of experiences and analyses on issues of racism to raise the awareness of different social groups. In this way, voluntarily or not, these artists are able to question the social relations of race, confirming the main hypothesis proposed for the research and showing how postcolonial arts can intervene in the political realm and our understanding of it.

In Belgium, hip hop and rap music act as a "third space," allowing marginalized youth to resist the dominant cultural model and find legitimacy by affirming their identity through global solidarity and where experiences of deep discrimination fuel a narrative challenging oppressive dominant models with various strategies. Therefore, the first political struggle of this movement was, and remained for a long time, simply to gain acceptance and to have a say and be heard in social, cultural, and artistic matters in Belgium, on the same footing as other social and artistic movements and thus be recognized and assert legitimacy in doing so. In this way, hip hop enables (marginalized) young people to participate in shaping Francophone Belgian culture and connect with diverse individuals outside their daily environments. This makes it easier to understand the apparent contradictions in an expression used by Benny B to sum up the emergence and development of the hip hop movement in Belgium, the idea of "youth race." Indeed, using such wording that talks about a "race" that is not one contributes to challenge the inherent contradictions of racism and colonialism that are still living with us. Since the concept of race does not exist from a biological point of view, there is nothing to prevent Benny B from using it on the basis of a social construct other than skin color and phenotypic differences. This approach is reminiscent of that employed by pioneering global hip hop groups and organic intellectuals, reflecting a desire to play with postcolonial contradictions and paradoxes surrounding the concept of race and racial relations, and articulating a political discourse and resistance against the racial order established since slavery and colonization.

Pioneers of Belgian hip hop and other contemporary Belgian Francophone rap music artists seem then to act as organic intellectuals; due to the role they play in their social group to express its interests and challenge the dominant ideology. By researching and adapting hip hop to their local context, they helped build a collective identity and a sense of group consciousness. Their work glocalized hip hop and rap music into a platform for resistance, providing a tool for protest against the dominant culture and inspiring future generations of the movement in Francophone Belgium. In this way, they participated in establishing an authenticity to hip hop culture and rap music in Francophone Belgium and thus gave to global hip hop its Francophone space. The

emergence and development of the concept of authenticity in Francophone Belgian hip hop has also taken place and continues to develop in relation to what can be considered purely commercial imperatives and therefore not credible or legitimate enough to claim to be hip hop or rap.

Indeed, mass culture being linked to the market phenomenon, the beginning of the consecration of Francophone Belgian rap as a genre in its own right around 2015, and the integration of representatives of the professional music industry into its art world, have raised again certain critics warning of a dilution, or even instrumentalization, of its messages and sociopolitical postures of protest into purely commercial and capitalist objectives. This process of artistic legitimization by the market brings us back to the considerations related to postcoloniality and postcolonial exoticism where the narrative of resistance in hip hop can be mobilized for the commodification of a postcolonial cultural object, whose recognition by the market underpins the idea that this cultural good functions as an implicit operator of a minority and relates then to a minority practice. In this context, the processes of racialization denounced by rap artists can serve their professional and commercial interests, as well as those of some of their collaborators in the chains and networks of cooperation. The paradox that emerges at first glance from this situation, where the same stereotypes are both deconstructed and reconstructed, is not so surprising when we recall the perpetual tension between commerce and authenticity that brings its own reading grid to the history of hip hop and rap; it seems that from the outset, the narrative of resistance inscribed in hip hop may have been established, among other things, as a marketing strategy. This phenomenon is repeated in Francophone Belgium.

In this context of popular culture being totally or partially a product of music, culture, and/or entertainment industries, the analysis of the political dimension and politicization of Francophone Belgian rap music involves considering it outside of the traditional and formal understanding of politics. This posture makes it possible to nuance, clarify, or even reject certain analyses that establish a division between political participation behaviors characterized as committed or non-committed. These elements are central to the general analytical framework established for this research. From this perspective, the analysis of the empirical data regarding the three sub-areas of the concept of politics mobilized to shed an initial theoretical light on the subject shows how artists can demonstrate political expressions and social commentary directed towards particular aspects of these three political sub-dimensions. This allows for the identification of spaces framing hip hop politics outside of formal politics, while identifying

those that are part of institutionalized policy and in which hip hop succeeds or has succeeded, through various configurations, in expanding to a certain extent, as shown by the example of youth cultural policy in Francophone Belgium.

Speaking of "policies," various productions from the political system are considered by the artists and certain themes appear to be priorities for them (immigration, security and police repression, economy and job market, culture, inequalities). The analysis also shows a certain interest in international relations around respect for human rights, as well as more general geopolitical or geo-economic considerations. On "politics," it appears that the category of politicians and other groups of people regarded as political professionals can be strongly criticized for their status as ruling elites who control governance and the distribution of resources. In the scheme of international relations, governmental or non-governmental organizations can also be the subject of critical reflection. Obviously, certain political ideologies can be vigorously contested, starting with ideological positions of conservatives or the far right on questions of immigration or identity, or global capitalism. Finally, the (Francophone) Belgian "polity" is challenged and contested on certain key aspects: the lack of respect for the rule of law and democracy in the experiences of racial discrimination recounted, a certain sense of injustice with regard to these same discriminations (and consequently a critique of the judicial institution), and a denunciation of colonialism and its remnants in the understanding of the racist phenomenon. In so doing, national cultural identity is challenged by counter-hegemonic discourses based on postcolonial experiences, calling for full recognition of multiculturalism in Belgium and the end of racial discrimination. Ultimately, it is the very legitimacy of the State institution and the exercise of its power that can be called into question by certain Francophone Belgian rap artists, sometimes using a kind of artistic violence against it, in response to the violence they consider having been subjected to by this power.

While these elements thus make it possible to identify the places and spaces where the political dimension of race relations in Francophone Belgian hip hop's politics can emerge and evolve, this does not mean that rap music should be considered as inherently and automatically political, nor should it be attributed to any specific political movement. Nevertheless, the political history of Francophone Belgian rap music reveals a certain constant theme in the expressions of dissent and social protest formulated by its artists, namely the rejection of racism in general, the denunciation of racial discrimination, and the fight against far-right ideology. We can see, for example, how certain rappers are involved in deconstructing a (post)colonial narrative that

glorifies Belgian colonialism in Central Africa, while colonial ideology continues to fuel structural racial discrimination today. In doing so, these artists are involved, willingly or not, in the politicization of collective memory in Belgium, in a context of resurgent postcolonial debate and the recent emergence of public criticism of colonial propaganda. They are thus participating in the reconstruction of shared memories around immigration in Belgium and Europe, and more specifically around Belgian colonialism and its consequences today, notably by combating the denial of memory that has long been maintained in Belgium. Indeed, the staging of their artistic expressions opposes a finite acceptance of the past and promotes its constant consideration in the analysis of the present and in establishing the directions we would seek to give it in order to move towards greater social justice and effective democracy. In doing so, these rap music artists implement a practice of decoloniality of knowledge and power and promote a critical questioning of certain founding narratives of the Belgian national imaginary and of historical legacies being highly racialized.

The analysis shows that these artists are far from completely disinterested in "political" issues but use their own means to assert their political subjectivity through hip hop culture and rap music, engaging in the political outside of formal politics. To report on these dynamics of engagement and politicization, it is therefore necessary to look for rap music artists' political discourse wherever it can primarily be found, i.e., in songs and other artworks, as well as in their public statements and interviews. While nowadays the economic dimension marginalized the explicit political one, hip hop culture and rap music may still call for constructive and concrete social changes. Although there may be some pessimism about the ability of rap music to protect and maintain the authenticity of its message of resistance, seeing it transformed into mere cultural entertainment, the simple fact that individuals from structurally discriminated minority groups in Europe and Belgium continue to invest in and appropriate spaces for expression and to make it a wholly or partly professional activity is still a form of commitment. As a result, the narrative of resistance embedded in hip hop continues to spread on a potentially global scale, without it being possible to predict the configuration of the tension that this narrative will experience at a given moment between commerce and culture, between capitalist misappropriation and authenticity.

Finally, considering hip hop culture and rap music as objects of study in their own right that can be included in the field of political and social sciences allows us to highlight their potential as tools for understanding multiple contemporary societal phenomena and dynamics. The

theoretical approach of this research, drawing on several disciplines and research fields, allows the presenting of several ways of approaching and reflecting on the relationship between hip hop and the political sphere, in order to understand how and in what ways hip hop and rap can be political, how and in what ways they can recreate their own political field outside of formal politics and reflect and participate in the fluctuations of the latter. To do this, I situated Francophone Belgian hip hop and rap music within the broader narrative of these cultures and music genres, with the aim of gaining insight into the rich contradictions inherent in this narrative in the local context of Francophone Belgium, and to draw on this richness to deepen their analysis as well as the analysis of the social and political processes in which they are involved.

A universal language specific to hip hop culture and rap music can be grasped to better understand how these social worlds contribute to building, forging, and developing cultural identities whose constituent elements overlap and mix in a perspective that may appear contradictory, but that in reality stands in opposition to any essentialist dynamic, affirming and demonstrating that these identities are anything but fixed in the space-time of human beings. By playing on the subtlety of all its apparent contradictions, hip hop allows us, to a certain extent, to transcend historically established sociopolitical boundaries that are nowadays at the heart of major contemporary societal debates. In this way, its practitioners, artists, and critics are creating a third space, a kind of common territory where no one is supposed to claim any right of ownership and where everyone is welcome, on the sole condition that they are and remain "authentic." The scientific study of a cultural and political phenomenon such as hip hop and Francophone Belgian rap music is therefore very useful in shedding light on the role that arts and culture can play in public policy with a variety of objectives and themes (social cohesion, the fight against discrimination, urban policy, education, employment inclusion and entrepreneurship, cultural diplomacy, etc.), and that would combine general fields that are often considered distant (science, art, and public action), yet can be brought into dialogue for concrete objectives and through relevant processes, mechanisms, practices, and spaces.

At the end of this research, the answers provided to its main questions allow us to raise new questionings regarding the latest developments in Francophone Belgian rap music. The main ones arising from the elements of analysis developed here undoubtedly relate to the integration and recognition of Francophone Belgian rap in the European music industry and the potential consequences of developments relating to its commodification. These questions could be the

subject of further studies, which would contribute to the ongoing development of thinking on hip hop politics in Francophone Belgium and, more generally, on the phenomenal impact of hip hop on global popular culture.

For example, speaking of power relations in the artistic legitimation of cultural goods associated with minority groups, the question of the specificities and potential evolutions of the racialized assignment of rap music to a minority practice in the music industry and popular culture could be explored in light of the most recent and upcoming developments in the commodification of Francophone Belgian rap. This could, for example, shed light on certain practices that may be described as neocolonial in the context of the commodification of Francophone Belgian rap music nowadays. Speaking specifically of state cultural action and public support for hip hop, the issue of racism and the reproduction of racial inequalities in the cultural and artistic sectors in Belgium and Europe could be addressed and challenged exclusively. Speaking more generally of educational studies and hip-hop-based education, the use of hip hop as a tool for education and knowledge that deconstructs and breaks free from the racial prism and promotes social justice may be questioned again by considering the context of global hip hop and rap music today as consumer goods. Furthermore, within the growing field of (global) hip hop studies, the proliferation of research and the emergence of multidisciplinary methodological perspectives, such as arts practice research, offer promising ground for new ciphers to emerge where everyone may engage according to their respective positionalities to foster the comprehensive integration of hip hop culture into the framing of its own academic discourse.

To conclude, it appears that reflection on the forms of political mobilizations against racism in current rap music, in Francophone Belgium and elsewhere, is far from over. We can be pleased about this because after more than 50 years of existence, hip hop culture and rap music do indeed appear as catalysts of societal dynamics. Despite their integration into the globalized and homogenizing capitalist economy as a cultural product, hip hop and rap music can retain their specific cultural and symbolic heritage. Nevertheless, speaking more as an insider within this culture, if we rap artists want this legacy to live on in the future history of this music and its cultural identity, I think it is our responsibility to remain alert to defend the symbolic territory of protest culture against the Trojan horses of a music industry driven solely by the quest for profit. Even though, after all, rap music should remain first what artists want it to be, I believe it is our responsibility to question our own positioning and role as artists in the potential dilution

of the social commentary and protest potential of globalized rap music.[321] Anyway, whether we talk about entertaining/commercial rap music, socially-conscious/political rap music, or both, let us carry on keeping it real while remembering one of Rival's key lines in "*A la vie à la mort*" ["To Life and Death"]: "*Chacun ses barreaux, cauchemar d'une vie de rêve*/ *Un peu de démago', on rappe et d'autres crèvent*" ["To each his own bars, nightmare of a dream life/ A little of demago', we rap and others die"].

[321] It seems to me that this is what Kendrick Lamar has always done in his personal approach, culminating in the songs "Not Like Us" (2024) or "Watch the Party Die" (2024), for example, released in the wake of his public rivalry with Drake, a rivalry crystalizing again the historical tension in global hip hop between culture and commerce.

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- Jay-Z, *The Blue Print*, Roc-A-Fella Records/ Def Jam Recordings, 2001.
- Kaaris, *Or noir*, Therapy Music, 2013.
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Appendices

Section 1

Compilation of the lyrics from the main discography corpus

- **"*A la vie à la mort*" [2009] – Rival**

[Verse 1]

[…] *Chacun ses barreaux, cauchemar d'une vie de rêve/ Un peu de démago', on rappe et d'autres crèves*

[Chorus]

Dans les ondes, sous la mer (représente le hip hop)/ De la haine à l'amour (représente le hip hop)
Sur les scènes, sur les murs (représente le hip hop)/ A la vie à la mort ("represent", "hip hop")

[Verse 2]

[…] *Passe mon rap en radio si t'en as l'occasion*
Blessé dans l'égo et rien qui tempère/ Destin d'illégaux, le calme, les tempêtes
Chacun ses barreaux, cauchemar d'une vie de rêve/ Un peu de démago', on rappe et d'autres crèves

[Verse 3]

[…] *Rival c'est un couteau dans le cœur de la variet'/ Qu'il n'y ait pas de quiproquo avec vos vedettes*
Chacun ses barreaux, cauchemar d'une vie de rêve/ Un peu de démago', on rappe et d'autres crèves

- **"*A préciser*" [2010] – Mr. Rouge (Fragn's Bridge)**

[Verse 1]

Eh ouais, eh ouais, jusqu'à toi on est venu/ Avec tenue et sans aucune retenue
Histoire de dire ce qu'on pense/Avec un minimum de bon sens
Vas-y débecte même si c'est pas dans mon sens/ Mes intérêts t'façon ça fait longtemps que j'fais sans
Pour l'amour de la tchatche ça c'est dans le sang/ Jusqu'au bout du match t'es fou c'est pas encore la mi-temps
T'as capté le plan/ C'est le son qui l'emporte son mystère, sa débrouille, tu vois rouge dans le poste
Il me semble/ Que t'es vite traumatisé
La boucle est pleine il suffit de peu pour que ça déborde/ Mais la rime est reine

Et à mon arc j'ai plus d'une corde, DJ, soundsystem, les gens qui bossent/ MC, b-boy un coup de spray dans la gorge et si ça arrache le sol c'est qu'il y en a qui supportent

- **"*Alors on danse*" [2009] – Stromae**

[Verse 1]

Qui dit études dit travail/ Qui dit taff te dit des thunes
Qui dit argent dit dépenses/ Qui dit crédit dit créance
Qui dit dette, te dit huissier/ Lui dit assis dans la merde
Qui dit amour, dit les gosses/ Dit toujours et dit divorce
Qui dit proches, te dit deuils/ Car les problèmes ne viennent pas seul
Qui dit crise, te dit monde/ Dit famine et dit tiers monde
Qui dit fatigue dit réveil/ Encore sourd de la veille
Alors on sort pour oublier tous les problèmes

- **"*Amnésie internationale*" [2001] – Starflam**

Original lyrics

[Verse 1: Akro]

Le manque est mis en cause dans chacune de mes névroses/ C'est sous son aile que je m'indispose
Suppose que je ne vaille rien et que tu vailles tout/ On en revient aux aryens et est-ce un atout ?
D'ici à Dakar, des kilomètres d'infraction/ De dignité dérobée avec effraction
Tes actions c'est comme prier l'orage/ Ça ne ramène pas un gosse que la faim a pris en otage
Dans les villages, l'amnésie circule comme l'Ébola/ Venant d' Occident avec accord des consulats
Rougis, mets une bougie à ta fenêtre/ Et ta culpabilité viendra à disparaître
Comme l'être disparaît en Afrique, disparaît en Asie/ Disparaît en Russie et même ici
Dernièrement quant l'inertie s'installe/ C'est l'amnésie in-ter-na-tio-nale

[Verse 2: Baloji]

On n'oublie rien, on ne s'habitue pas non plus/ Même quand la mémoire sélective influe
Qui compatit s'accommode, qui se tait s'y accorde/ Et le globe se dérobe dans la discorde
Tant qu'on résorbe les conflits et les carences/ En éliminant le moins influent de la balance
La colombe de la paix évite les zones de turbulences/ Tant la course au progrès la met de connivence
Mais qui est coupable de crimes contre l'humanité ?/ Qui ne cesse de raviver le bûcher des vanités ?
Homicide volontaire dont nous sommes tributaires/ Où seul le désordre nous est salutaire

Pour déceler que les vrais assassins bossent chez Nestlé/ Tiennent le monde sous scellés muselés
Même si je porte leurs sigles sur mon tee-shirt Made in Corée/ Je pisse sur leur vision du monde édulcorée
Qui fait qu'un génocide vaut plus qu'un autre/ Comme détruire l'histoire d'un pays sans en payer la note

[Verse 3: Seg]
Toi t'y penses et moi j'oublie pas, chaque offense, chaque faux-pas/ Chaque scène de violence sur une enfance vouée à trépas
Plus qu'ouvrir les débats, désarmons les combats/ Pour que la raison de l'homme l'emporte sur des raisons d'état
Je suis là pour rafraîchir la mémoire collective/ Je suis là pour contrer la pensée sélective
Tu sais, le grain de sable dans les rouages bien huilés/ Politiquement incorrect pour son entourage humilié
Qui peut pas oublier, plutôt mourir que de plier/ Qui prétend pas changer le monde et qui vient pas le supplier
50 bougies, un demi siècle d'amnésie, l'âme nazie n'est pas morte/ Faut croire l'histoire se répète à nos portes

English translation

[Verse 1: Akro]
Lack is at the root of all my neuroses/ It's under its wing that I'm indisposed
Suppose I'm worth nothing and you're worth everything/ We're back to the Aryans, and is that an asset?
From here to Dakar, miles of infraction/ Dignity stolen with breaking and entering
Your actions are like praying to the storm/ It doesn't bring back a kid taken hostage by hunger
In the villages, amnesia circulates like Ebola/ From the West with consulate approval
Blush, put a candle in your window/ And your guilt will disappear
As the being disappears in Africa, disappears in Asia/ Disappears in Russia and even here
Lately, when inertia sets in/ It's in-ter-na-tio-nal amnesia

[Verse 2: Baloji]
We don't forget anything, we don't get used to it either/ Even when selective memory influences
Those who sympathize accommodate, those who remain silent agree/ And the globe slips away in discord

As long as we resolve conflicts and deficiencies/ By eliminating the least influential from the scale
The dove of peace avoids trouble spots/ So much does the race for progress put it in collusion
But who is guilty of crimes against humanity?/ Who never ceases to revive the pyre of vanity?
Intentional homicide on which we depend/ Where only disorder can help us
To reveal that the real murderers work at Nestlé/ Keeping the world muzzled and sealed
Even if I wear their logos on my Made in Korea t-shirt/ I piss on their watered-down worldview
That makes one genocide worth more than another/ Like destroying a country's history without paying the price

[Verse 3: Seg]
Every scene of violence on a childhood doomed to death/ More than opening debates, let's disarm combat
So that human reason prevails over reasons of state/ I'm here to refresh the collective memory
[…] *50 candles, half a century of amnesia, the Nazi soul is not dead/ History is repeating itself on our doorstep*

- **"*Apartheid*" [1990] – Defi J**

[Verse 1]
[…] *Tu demandes libération/ De tous ces opprimés*
Qui hurlent le droit d'exister/ Arracher leur dignité
[…] *Atteinte aux droits d'humanité/ Je ne peux contester*
[…] *Tu vois je pense à l'apartheid/ Tu ne vois pas qu'il prospère*
Synonyme de cancer/ Danger, elle va mal la planète
[…] *Apartheid/ Oui je te répète*
Tu me casses la tête/ Guillemets, colère
Le peuple se réveille/ Le monde est en éveil
Apartheid, on est prêts/ Fais bien tes prières

[Verse 2]
Tu sais bien je ne fais pas de politique/ Mais seulement des critiques […]

- **"*Assis dans un coffee*" [2003] – CNN199**

[Verse 1: Djam le Rif]
[…] *On n'extériorise rien d'autre que nos vies*

[Verse 3: Rival]

[…] *Désolé j'peux rien écrire d'autre que ce qui m'a pas plu*

Le crew se place, que ce pays plat nous considère comme un de ces plis, que ça plaise ou non

- **"*Au fil de l'histoire*" [1994] – Malfrats Linguistiques (H-Posse)**

[Verse 1: Akro]

Le fil de l'Histoire m'a fait comprendre/ Que mes ancêtres bien des torts ont pu répandre

En Afrique, ils étaient de vaillants colonisateurs/ L'homme noir était le gibier, le blanc était le dominateur

De par sa peau claire il instaurait l'esclavage/ Apportait avec lui la Bible mais en arrachait les pages

A l'heure où Dieu voyait les hommes en tous points égaux/ Ils réservaient à leurs semblables le statut d'animaux

C'est ainsi qu'on assistait à un véritable génocide/ Le comportement du blanc se faisait de plus en plus avide

Il entraina l'africain sur de grands bateaux/ Contraint d'abandonner ses biens sans oser dire un mot

Bien des persécutions ont ainsi touchées l'homme noir/ Le déportant sur tous les continents au fil de l'Histoire

[Verse 2: Monsieur R]

C'est ainsi que le nègre se voit sur un grand continent/ Il n'est plus qu'une poupée qu'on manipule allègrement

Dans le Sud il travaille dans des champs de cotons/ Sous prétexte que l'homme blanc fonce sous un soleil de plomb

Avec le temps les [missing words] *se renouvellent/ L'esclavage s'efface pour faire place aux sites industriels*

Hommes et femmes s'épuisaient de semaines en semaines/ En espérant un jour connaître une vie plus sereine

Malheureusement après le lynchage vint le chômage/ La tristesse puis l'ivresse lentement se propagent

Seuls les directeurs de grandes entreprises/ Gaspillaient leur argent en s'abreuvent de bêtises

[missing words] *comportement dérisoire/ Cette peur de l'inconnu les poursuivra au fil de l'Histoire*

[Verse 3: Akro and Monsieur R]

[Akro] *Après tant de pleurs, les années passèrent/ Le noir-américain rebâtît sa vie sur de nouvelles terres*

A maintes reprises on avait souillé le passé de cet homme/ Il retrouvait désormais une vie conforme à la norme

[Mr R.] *Et Jo, arrête-toi, tu patauges en pleine fable/* [missing words] *à nouveau déplorable*

[Akro] *Un exemple ?* [Mr R.] *Dans les années soixante/ Où le refus d'un nègre dans les magasins était chose courante*

Ceci n'est pas une leçon d'histoire ou de l'afrocentrisme/ J'éclaircis un passé qui m'a plongé dans le scepticisme

C'est vrai pourquoi suis-je né un beau jour en Belgique/ Alors que mes racines et ma culture sont en Afrique

[Akro] *En tout temps, l'homme a craint bien des différences/ Le racisme est le fruit de tant d'ignorance*

Voilà pourquoi aujourd'hui tant de fascistes persistent/ Ils manipulent l'économie de certains pays comme des marionnettistes

Donner du pain aux pauvres afin d'instaurer son pouvoir/ C'est contribuer à la [missing words] *donc on pense sans cesse à l'histoire*

[Outro]

[…] *Pour une compile, Fidèles au vinyl/ Rap 100% belge*

Compilation belge/ Respect to Deutschland

- **"*Black Out*" [2015] – Youssoupha**

[Verse 1]

Africa nouveau western, j'braque les dignitaires en diligence/ J'suis même pas expert, j'suis ni militaire ni militant

Quand le peuple espère pouvoir diriger ses dirigeants/ Les colons sectaires reviennent diviser nos dividendes […]

[Verse 2]

[…] *Négrophobie en Occident, pire encore au Maghreb*

Et l'ignorance reste la pire des soumissions/ J'suis pas issu d'l'immigration, moi, j'suis issu d'la colonisation

J'prie pour la mobilisation, l'espoir après les crises/ J'veux pas être victime de l'Histoire, j'veux qu'mes enfants l'écrivent
Parce que je crois en leur avenir, aux fruits de leur effort/ Or, pétrole, terre, écoles, espoir, jeunesse, rêve, refrain

- **"*Bruxelles Vie*" [2016] – Damso**

[Verse 1]
[…] *Le rap français K.O. en un seul feat./ Vie*

[Verse 2]
[…] *J'connais qu'un seul King, c'est Martin Luther/ Enfance pas tranquille, coups de feu, je n'ai plus peur* […]

- **"*But en or*" [2020] – Kalash Criminel (featuring Damso)**

[Verse 1: Kalash Criminel]
[…] *Moi, j'y pense à chaque instant, nos ancêtres dans les champs d'coton/ Bien sûr que j'suis pas content (ta-ta-ta), mon pays s'fait tuer à cause du coltan*

[Verse 2: Damso]
Kalash Crimi', Dems, du sale avec ou sans mélanine, ah, ah/ Mon cœur timide saigne, j'ai mal, ma douleur en quelques lignes, ah, ah
Rebelle armé tâche mes souvenirs, résidus de balle perforant les murs/ Ces jours sinistres violent des âmes, sont perdus dans champs de mines, ah, ah
Piou, ratatata, bang, welcome to the jungle (eh)/ On est passés du black power au black, black lives matter (ouh)
Pourquoi tu cries à l'aide ? Africain jamais ne te prosterne, non non/ Debout, qui nous arrêtera ?
Montre-moi qu'une lettre au roi, bah oui (bah oui), les colonies nous ont sali (sali)/ Les missionnaires nous ont promis (promis) que l'or vaudrait moins que nos vies (nos vies)
Douze millions de morts plus tard, on parle de dettes et de crédits (crédits)/ Mains d'Anvers, quelques têtes de négros, zoo humain, avril 58 (oh lala)

- **"*Ce plat pays*" [1997] – Starflam**

[Verse 1: Seg]

[…] *La Belgique mise en hypothèque comme au Monopoly/ Quant au vox populi, il y a longtemps qu'il est aboli*

Comment peut-on espérer l'unité d'un pays/ Quand celui-ci ne doit qu'à sa dette le fait de sa survie

Qu'il est affublé d'un système administratif débile/ Qu'une guerre des polices notoire le rend encore plus fébrile

Que des politiciens véreux agissent en toute impunité/ Sans être inquiétés sous le couvert de l'immunité

Une démocratie à deux vitesses (deux vitesses)/ Quand le droit de vote devient un devoir c'est là que le bât blesse […]

[Verse 2: Seg]

[…] *Parlons-en, du climat nord-sud (nord-sud) qui menace/ Une démocratie déjà fragilisé par une classe politique*

Au centre de trop nombreuses polémiques et critiques/ De l'opinion publique qui veut du changement

Que des têtes tombent pour vice d'ingérence/ Réclame de l'amalgame des coupables et de la transparence […]

- **"*Choisis ton camp*" [2001] – Starflam (featuring Uman)**

[Verse 2: Uman]

[…] *400 ans d'esclavage, tu crois que ça s'arrête là*

Les chaînes les plus solides sont celles qu'on ne voit pas/ Les dépendances les plus sordides, celles qu'on ne sent pas

Dis-leur : ça ne prend pas, dis-leur : on ne veut pas/ Ils ne nous materont pas, ils ne nous dresseront pas

On ne se rendra pas, ils ne nous tiendront pas/ Dis-leur qu'on ne te dirige pas. Dis-leur qu'on ne te contrôle pas

- **"*CNN199*" [2003] – CNN199**

[Chorus]

CNN199, quel que soit l'arme on braque/ CNN199, du micro au fatcap

CNN199, dans la rue comme sur plaques/ CNN199, on vit comme on rappe

[Verse 4: Rival]

J'débite dans le but que tous militent, en fervents serviteurs du hip hop

[…] *On baise ton système*

De la part de tous ceux que tes flammes ont pu emporter/ Une génération que cette pute de mère patrie aurait bien voulu avorter […]

- **"*Colère*" [1990] – Benny B (featuring DJ Daddy K)**

Original lyrics

[Verse 1]

Toi ! Ecoute bien ce que je vais te dire/ Prépare toi à affronter ton avenir

[…] *Nous ne sommes pas du côté des enfoirés/ N'ayons pas peur de le crier, il faut les enfermer*

Nous sommes pour la paix, nous ne sommes pas des fous/ Et nous faisons partie de la Nation Zulu

[Verse 2]

Je suis un b-boy et ma vie n'est qu'un mystère/ Donc jusqu'au plus profond de mes pensées je cherche la lumière

Celle qui me fera connaître le sort de la justice

[…] *Moi ce que je voulais c'était avoir une chance/ Maintenant que j'ai grandi tout le monde sent ma présence*

[Verse 3]

Car il faut que je te dise que moi j'en ai assez/ Que les guerres c'est des bêtises, qu'il faut les arrêter

Que dans ce monde d'injustices, dans les villes et les cieux/ Où celui qui parle de paix est pris pour un parasite

Je sais c'est pas facile de pouvoir s'exprimer/ D'échanger nos idées sans se faire emmerder […]

English translation

[Verse 1]

You! Listen carefully to what I'm going to say/ Prepare yourself to face your future […]

We are not on the side of the bastards/ Let's not be afraid to shout it out, they must be locked up

We are for peace, we are not fools/ And we are part of the Zulu Nation

[Verse 2]

I'm a B-Boy and my life is a mystery/ So to the depths of my thoughts I seek the light

The one who will make me know the fate of justice […]

What I wanted was to have a chance/ Now that I've grown up everyone feels my presence

[Verse 3]

Because I have to tell you that I've had enough/ That wars are nonsense, that they must be stopped

In this world of injustice, in the cities and the skies/ Where the one who speaks of peace is taken for a parasite

I know it's not easy to express yourself/ To exchange our ideas without being bothered […]

- **"*Comme on est venu*" [2003] – CNN199 (featuring Defi J)**

[Verse 1: Rival]

[…] *Destin déchiré par des frontières, khoya* […]

[Chorus: Defi J]

Comme on est venu, comme on repartira […]

[Verse 2: Rival]

[…] *Au nom de quelle intégration je devrais être un autre ?/ Dis moi* [censored words in the original track] *au nom de quelle loi tu assassines les nôtres ?*

[Verse 3: Rival]

Pour les victimes de ta sale politique, de ta sale justice et de tes sales flics

[…] *A jamais sous les feux de la rampe et ce même quitte à voir partir le peu qu'on a partir en fumée (comme ça tu le sais)*

- **"*Couleur noir*" [1990] – Defi J & Rumky (BRC)**

[Chorus]

Couleur noire, oui tu penses au désespoir/ Au fond de ta mémoire les pensées deviennent amères

Moi de mon côté je prends le même prétexte/ Pour expliquer aux gens l'effet de ma colère

[Verse 3]

[…] *Cette Ethiopie, je vois ça, je suis triste*

Malheureux, c'est affreux/ Venez, lançons-leur un vœu

A tous ceux qui approuvent/ Faisons ensemble une course

Il ne leur reste plus que nous/ Nous sommes leur seul secours

Ils toquent, ils toquent, ce n'est pas la bonne porte/ Quand personne leur ouvre, ce n'est pas le mouv'

Il ne faut pas croire que tout restera toujours au top/ Simplement en criant dans la rue Hip Hop

- **"*Crise de nègre*" [2010] – Pitcho**

[Verse 1]

Un jour de décembre au cœur des ténèbres/ Je suis sorti des cendres sans savoir que j'étais nègre

[…] *Tout ça car papa ne voulait pas marcher aux pas/ Alors il est devenu la proie du roi Léopard*

On a dû quitter la jungle et aller voir autre part/ On a traversé la mer, atterri dans la merde

[…] *Pour mon frère et moi, l'école fut le premier choc/ Nos premiers profs avaient du mal à prononcer nos noms*

Preuve qu'ils auraient du mal à nous trouver normaux/ Blessés profondément dès leur premier mot

On a compris qu'on aurait du mal à pénétrer leur monde/ Et à fréquenter leurs mômes

[Chorus]

Dans tout ce bordel je cherche ma place/ Je n'arrive pas à la trouver et ça me tracasse

Au bord de la crise de nerf/ J'ai développé une crise de nègre

Quand j'en parle on me dit que j'exagère/ Mais dans le fond ça me fait mal et il faut que je la gère

J'arrive pas à l'avaler donc il faut que je la gerbe/ Ma crise de nègre

[Verse 2]

La première fois qu'on m'a dit que j'étais noir/ Je l'ai pris pour une insulte

D'ailleurs le gosse qui m'a dit ça, j'ai traité sa mère de pute/ Et sa mère m'a crié dessus en me disant que je n'étais qu'une brute

Ce fut le début de ma lutte/ Des combats à mains nues

Des blessures au menu/ J'avais sept ans et pour certain un petit Satan

Paraît qu'avec le temps, la rage s'étend et puis s'éteint/ Et moi j'attends

J'ai la trentaine/ Passé par tant de haine

Et tant de questions sans réponses/ Malgré les tentations, je n'ai pas encore jeté l'éponge

Malgré les tonnes d'actions/ J'ai l'impression

Que pour les miens, il n'y a rien qui change de toutes façons/ Me parle pas de manque de pot

Quand la nôtre se voit de trop/ Se voit tellement de trop que certains

S'éclaircissent le teint/ À la recherche d'un élixir certain

Pour conjurer le sort/ Au lieu d'avancer ensemble et de conjuguer l'effort

[Verse 3]

Le silence de nos parents est éloquent/ Pour eux depuis longtemps le modèle était le blanc

[…] *Quand on parle de nous, tout devient complexe/ Toujours cette impression qu'il n'y a que les nôtres qu'on oppresse*

Qui vivent mal et qui ont presque une vie de clebs/ Qui possèdent un futur qui obsède car laisse trop perplexe

Un futur qui empêche de briser les chaînes/ De ne plus courber l'échine, de monter sur l'échelle

De ne plus voir les signes d'espoir que dessine le sourire de nos mômes/ De croire que c'est possible de réussir sans faire l'aumône

[Outro]

Ceci n'est pas un cri de colère, ici il ne s'agit plus de couleur/ Mais ici, il s'agit bien de douleur, enfouie au plus profond de mon cœur

- **"*Cruella*" [2011] – Shay (featuring Booba)**

[Verse 1: Shay]

[…] *Lequel est le plus rapide, postuler ou braquer ?/ Hum...Le temps c'est de l'argent, j'ai du temps à gagner*

- **"*De Frente (El Diablo II)*" [2001] – Starflam**

Original lyrics

[Verse 3: Kaer]

[…] *Africa y América del Sur siguen presos/ Esclavos de Europa, Japón y los estachos cuchos*

Degenerados dirigiendo al mundo/ Sacándole el jugo al tercer mundo

Interés, egoísmo, hipocresía/ Los grandes narcos son de la C.I.A.

Haciendo la ley sin fe ni caché/ Matando al Che, soltando a Pinochet

[Verse 4: Baloji]

Toujours le même cancer qui ronge sous le tropique des capricornes/ Les miens se bornent, noient leur esprit dans la spiritueuse

Et dans cette nébuleuse la bêtise reste contagieuse/ Tant qu'ils croient en Dieu avant de croire en eux

Qu'ils prient ce Jésus blond qui laisse l'Afrique en banqueroute/ C'est pourquoi le rêve de mon père est mon cauchemar d'Afropéen

Qui sert les fesses plus que les poings el diablo n'est pas loin/ Et chasse mes illusions sur ce pays de cocagne

Où l'on slalome entre évasions et bagne/ Entre la loi de la jungle et celle des hommes, mais je lutte avec la hargne
Dépeins cette nature morte glandeur nature, ce tableau/ Où l'on cherche tous l'Eldorado...El diablo

English translation

[Verse 3: Kaer]
[…] *Africa and South America are still prisoners/ Slaves of Europe, Japan and the old ones*
Degenerates running the world/ Squeezing the juice out of the third world
Interest, selfishness, hypocrisy/ Big narcos are from the C.I.A.
Making the law without faith or style/ Killing Che, releasing Pinochet

[Verse 4: Baloji]
Still the same cancer gnawing under the tropic of Capricorns/ Mine are limited, drowning their minds in spirits
And in this nebula stupidity remains contagious/ As long as they believe in God before they believe in themselves
Let them pray to that blond Jesus who leaves Africa bankrupt/ That's why my father's dream is my Afropean nightmare
Who uses his buttocks more than his fists el diablo isn't far away/ And chases away my illusions about this land of milk and honey
Where we slalom between escape and prison/ Between the law of the jungle and the law of men, but I fight with a fierce spirit
Depict this still life natural lazybones, this painting/ Where we all seek El Dorado...El diablo

- **"*De jours comme de nuit*" [2003] – CNN199**

[Verse 1: Djam le Rif]
[…] *Pourquoi j'donnerai mon cul c'est pas mon truc/ J'représente juste l'identité de nos quartiers c'est tout* […]

[Verse 2: Ali Pacha]
[…] *Hip hop d'assault, on fera de notre passage un hymne à la résistance*

[Verse 3: Rival]

[…] *Tes flics peuvent toujours me palper les burnes/ C'est à croire que ça change rien comme nos voies dans les urnes* […]

- **"*Dems*" [2014] – Damso**

[Verse]

Hé m'sieur, fais d'la politique, y'a que comme ça que t'auras ma voix […]

- **"*Dilemme*" [2019] – Lous and The Yakuza**

[Verse 2]

[…] *Au plus j'ai la haine, au plus ils me font de la peine/ Ma peau n'est pas noire, elle est couleur ébène*

Lous es-tu sereine ou fais-tu juste la guerre ?/ Tu n'es pas parfaite, ton erreur reste humaine

- **"*Ecoute! C'est du rap français*" [1990] – Benny B (featuring DJ Daddy K)**

[Verse 1]

Tends bien les oreilles, fais travailler tes méninges/ Montre que oui pour une fois tu n'as rien d'un singe

Car aujourd'hui tu as la preuve en écoutant mon beat/ Qu'après tant et tant d'efforts le rap français existe

Et mon idée à moi c'est de lancer le message/ Dire à tout le monde que le rap français a la rage

Qu'il est né d'une nation qui domine aujourd'hui/ Et tous les b-boys en font partie

[Verse 3]

Je ne fais pas de politique mais je t'ouvre les yeux/ Dans ce monde irréel où l'on ne peut faire ce qu'on veut

Ne confonds pas le rap avec une simple chanson/ C'est un message de paix qui parle d'une autre façon

Et je ne demande qu'une seule chose, c'est que l'on m'écoute/ Je ne dis que la vérité il n'y a pas de doutes

[…] *Ce que t'entends oui c'est du rap français et ça va faire des dégâts*

- **"*Et c'est comme ça*" [1996] – Daddy K**

[Verse 3]

[…] *Pourquoi c'est toujours le bronzé qui se fait accuser par le préjugé ?/ Jugé par les gens sans jugeote*

Moi je m'écarte de ces gens et m'éclate dans la hip hop

[…] *Car je ne dis que la vérité, rien que la vérité/ Inch'Allah j'espère qu'on va tous s'en tirer*

Car représente aussi les frères dans les bas quartiers/ Qui n'ont plus rien à perdre et te disent : "assez" […]

- **"*Fusion organisée*" [1997] – Starflam**

[Outro: Baloji]

Attends mais, dès les moments que t'essayes de redevenir droit

Tu vois, t'essayes de te réajuster, tu vois, de sortir de la marge, de toutes ces conneries

Pourquoi ils te freinent ces fils de putes ?

Pourquoi ça fait maintenant 15 ans qu'on attend nos papiers pour être belge ?

Grand, comment t'explique ça ?

Ça fait 15 ans que j'attends pour être belge et vous me l'accorder quand ? Jamais ? Quoi ?

- **"*G. Remix*" [2011] – G.A.N (featuring Grödash, T-Killa, Profecy, and Youssoupha)**

[Verse 1: G.A.N.]

[…] *Et pourquoi on nous traite de macaques ?/ Le premier man qui passait de lianes en lianes était un white*

Ne fais pas trop le chaud tu ne feras pas long feu/ Bienvenue à BXL, ici on parle en fieu […]

[Verse 5: Youssoupha]

[…] *J'aurais pu venir bling-bling que je rappe au moins/ Y'avait tellement d'notre or sur la belle couronne du roi Baudouin* […]

- **"*Hip Hop Squad - Freestyle*" [1997] – Lady N (and others)**

[Verse 5: Lady N]

[…] *Si t'es pas content, moi c'est dans l'underground que j'ai choisi mon camp* […]

- **"*Hope*" [2020] – Indocile, Mr. Clasik, and Marù**

[Verse 2: Toucha]

[…] *Personne peut écrire ton histoire mieux que toi/ Le blanchiment de l'histoire au max* […]

[Verse 4: Fonix]

Nantis vs minorités

[…] *Cris de singes dans les gradins*

[…] *Du bruit, des odeurs chez les voisins/ Ils rêvent d'un pays blanc puritain*

- **"*Infrarouge*" [2020] – Frenetik**

[Verse 1]

[…] *Obligé d'leur montrer qu'on peut être impolis, ici tout est noir donc les lois s'abolissent/ Regards froids symbolisent, le genou sur la nuque de la juge et d'la police*

- **"*Je crie* peace" [1991] – M.C. Rayer**

Original lyrics

[DJ Intro]

"Party time is anytime and anytime is party time"

"Yo! (Ça va comme ça?)"/ "Peace in the world!"

[Verse 1]

Le monde dans lequel nous vivons est insupportable/ Depuis que les hommes l'ont rendu complètement invivable

A cause de la pollution, de ces constructions/ Et on ne voit plus à l'horizon qu'des montagnes de béton

La nature est négligée, souillée, dépouillée/ Toutes ses belles surfaces se sont désintégrées

Devant nous se dressent des paysages bidons/ L'empire de cette nouvelle génération

[DJ Hook 1]

"Peace in the world" [X2]

[Verse 2]

Génération future, est-ce que tu prends conscience/ De ces belles promesses que tu nous avances ?

Il faut te faire confiance, tenter notre chance/ Mais si tu nous déçois ce sera la vengeance

Alors décide toi à tracer ton chemin/ Et nous comptons sur toi pour qu'il soit fait de bien

Pour qu'il n'y ait plus de chagrin [missong word] *plus de faim/ Et que l'on puisse enfin parler en bien de notre destin*

Sans jamais avoir peur, oui peur d'une explosion/ Qui nous tuerait tous sans condition qui que nous soyons

Alors fais attention à toutes tes actions/ Car quoique tu fasses de toi nous dépendons

Alors future génération est-ce que t'as bien compris/ Que ce que nous voulons c'est un nouvel état d'esprit ?

Oui j'y tiens très fort c'est pour ça que je crie…

[DJ Hook 2]

…"Peace in the world" [X4]

[Verse 3]

[…] *Tu dois en avoir marre c'est toujours la même histoire/ Une histoire tournée autour d'un nouveau cri d'espoir*

"Bow-wow-wow-yippie-yo-yippie-yeah", (peace in the world!) [X2]

L'espoir que s'arrête ces souffrances non méritées/ Mais qui vous sont imposées par certains haut gradés

Qui profitent de leur puissance pour vous faire souffrir/ Et j'irai même jusqu'à dire pour s'enrichir

Mais il faut réagir, il faut nous réunir/ Afin de leur faire comprendre qu'à l'avenir

Nous devons être libre de pouvoir dire/ Ce que nous voulons sans en avoir peur de mourir

La liberté d'expression, ça je ne dis pas non/ Bien au contraire pour moi c'est la plus belle chose sur Terre

Le fait de parler librement et n'importe quand/ Me met de bonne humeur, oui moi le petit rappeur

Je dédicace ce rap à tous ceux qui n'ont pas peur/ De dire ce qu'ils pensent de ceux qui imposent la terreur

Sans qui nous ne pourrions pas vivre une si belle vie/ C'est pour eux d'ailleurs que maintenant je crie…

[DJ Outro]

…"Peace in the world" [X12]

English translation

[DJ Intro]

"Party time is anytime and anytime is party time" [in English in the original song]

"Yo! (Is this okay?)"/ *"Peace in the world!"* [in English in the original song]

[Verse 1]

The world we live in is unbearable/ Since men have made it completely unlivable

Because of pollution, because of these constructions/ And we can only see mountains of concrete on the horizon

Nature is neglected, soiled, stripped/ All these beautiful surfaces have disintegrated

In front of us stand fake landscapes/ The empire of this new generation

[DJ Hook 1]

"Peace in the world" [in English in the original song] [X2]

[Verse 2]

Future generation, do you realize/ Of these beautiful promises that you advance to us?

We must trust you, take our chances/ But if you disappoint us, it will be revenge

So decide to make your way/ And we count on you to make it good

So that there is no more sorrow, [missing word] *no more hungry/ That we can finally speak well of our destiny*

Without ever being afraid, yes, afraid of an explosion/ That would kill us all unconditionally whoever we are

So be careful with all your actions/ Cause whatever you do we depend on you

So future generation, do you understand / That what we want is a new mindset?

Yes, I want it very much, that's why I'm shouting…

[DJ Hook 2]

… "Peace in the world" [in English in the original song] [X4]

[Verse 3]

[…] *You must be fed up, it's always the same story/ A story that revolves around a new cry for hope*

"Bow-wow-wow-yippie-yo-yippie-yeah" [scratch], *(peace in the world!)* [X2]

The hope that the undeserved suffering will stop/ That are imposed on you by some high ranking officials

Who take advantage of their power to make you suffer/ And I would even go so far as to say to enrich themselves

But we must react, we must get together/ To make them understand that in the future

We must be free to say/ What we want without being afraid to die

The freedom of expression, that I do not say no/ On the contrary for me it is the most beautiful thing on Earth

The fact of speaking freely and at any time/ Put me in a good mood, yeah me the little rapper

I dedicate this rap to all those who are not afraid/ To say what they think of those who impose terror
Without whom we couldn't live such a good life/ And it's for them that I'm now shouting…

[DJ Outro]
…"Peace in the world" [in English in the original song] [X12]

- **"*Je me sens bien*" [1996] – Daddy K**

[Verse]
[…] *Mais je me sens mal quand un blanc tape un black/ Quand un frère se fait tuer ça me fait mal, ça me fait mal*
[…] *Mais je me sens mal quand je me fais contrôler/ Quand on m'accuse quand j'ai rien fait, ça me fait mal, ça me fait mal*
Mais je me sens mal quand les flics font des bavures/ Qu'ils nous mènent la vie dure, ça me fait mal, ça me fait mal […]

- **"*Je transvase (remix)*" [1996] – Defi J & The Def Rock Posse**

[Verse 3]
Pour Rumky, pour Defi, pour tous les posses/ Je prends ce qui nous sépare voici ce qui nous réunit
Par-dessus toutes classes, toutes couleurs, tous préjugés en toute méprise/ Oui le rap est gravé dans ma vie, oui j'en abuse […]

- **"*Justifié*" [2018] – Isha**

[Verse 2]
[…] *Mais est-c'que vous vous rendez compte ?/ Au pays, les morts s'entassent*
Tu marches des cadavres sous les pieds/ Indépendance cha cha, tout l'été […]

- **"*Karaktère K*" [1993] – K Particulier**

[Verse 1]
On ne singe pas les gangsters dans le but de se la jouer/ Nous restons simples, humbles et fiers tout en exprimant nos idées
Nous n'atteindrons jamais un niveau structure/ Si nous ne gagnons pas en maturité […]

- **"*La balafre*" [2003] – CNN199**

[Intro]

"C'est du CNN, maintenant tu sais que c'est du CNN"

[Verse 3: Rival]

On laissera rien au hasard et rien à personne/ [missing word] *dans le showbiz comme dans la foule*
CNN jusqu'à la fin de nos jours/ *Et dis leur qu'on a aussi des armes et pas juste des mots*
On le fera avec la même détermination/ *On l'fera derrière le micro ou devant un fourgon*
On peut déjà se vanter de peser des millions/ *Demande à c'pays ce que lui coûte mon groupe*
On continuera à leur faire payer le doute implanté dans nos cœurs/ *On est la rage qui brûle dans les yeux de nos frères et nos sœurs*
Et si on change rien, alors dis-toi qu'on rappe juste pour qu'on nous lâche la grappe/ *Ni leaders, ni cas social, et si la haine est au mic' c'est la vie qui le veut et pas le style*
J'peux pas faillir à mon rôle/ *J'ai le poids de tous les miens sur les épaules*

- **"*La case des 27 S*" [1997] – Big Shot**

[Verse 2]

[…] *A une race à part et supérieure ils se disent appartenir*/ *A l'immortalité, leur seul point faible, ils aspirent*
C'est pour cela qu'ils infestent la Terre de drogues et de virus/ *Qu'ils créent les guerres et le racisme en un seul processus* […]

[Verse 3]

[…] *Et cela avec l'approbation d'un peuple endoctriné*/ *Divisé en communautés pour être mieux contrôlé*
Faut pas te leurrer, la race humaine s'est fait bernée par l'avidité pécuniaire/ *De ces semblables, c'est pitoyable* […]

- **"*La corde raide*" [1997] – Starflam**

[Verse 2: Baloji]

[…] *Alors, au lieu de pourrir dans mes biz', j'élabore des textes*/ *Des rimes, des métaphores qui sont plus qu'un prétexte*

Pour convoiter autre chose que ce que mon voisin possède/ Pour ne plus que je stagne comme si j'étais au bled
Mais pour barrer, parer, contrecarrer l'imposture/ D'un système qui se sert de nous juste pour faire bonne figure
Exemple : pour payer nos impôts, nous sommes citoyens belges/ Mais pour avoir le droit de vote là, l'État nous tej'...
Et de notre torpeur, le bête se réjouit […]

[Verse 4: Baloji]
[…] *Même si ces rimes ne sont qu'un grain de sable face à des bâtisses/ Le but est atteint, tant que c'est à une réflexion qu'elles aboutissent*
Et mènent à une mutinerie par l'intellect/ Car le poing n'est efficace que quand le mental s'y injecte
Pour penser à long terme, surplomber le système/ Maîtriser l'engrenage pour ne plus que la bête nous tienne
C'est pour ça que j'intercède, c'est pour ça que je plaide/ Moi cet apprenti funambule sur la corde raide

- **"*La sonora*" [2001] – Starflam**

[Chorus]
En ces temps imparfaits
Pour chaque cause un effet
Si ce monde est imparfait
Ta vie est ce que t'en fais

[Bridge]
La sonora Starflam reste au programme
Proclame, clame : sonora Starflam si guapea, guapea
La sonora Starflam reste au programme
Rétame, crame, sonora Starflam si guapea, guapea

- **"*L'augmentation, pt. 1*" [2017] – Isha**

[Verse 1]
T'entends les battements d'cœur/ Y'a pas d'haineux, mon équipe, que des blacks, blancs, beurs

Et tu l'vois avec un perfecto, mon babtou, il a une tête d'escroc/ Tu t'demandes pourquoi j'l'appelle "négro", c'est parce qu'on a connu les mêmes blèmes-pro […]

- **"*Le bras en l'air, poing serré*" [2003] – Pitcho**

Original lyrics

[Verse 1]

Au fond c'est que tout ce qu'ils font est fait pour nous offenser/ Que tout ce qu'ils veulent c'est nous enfoncer
Ils nous haïssent juste parce qu'on est foncé/ Nos frères trahissent juste parce qu'ils sont forcés
De le faire s'ils veulent juste s'intégrer/ Au fond c'est eux qui ont creusés le fossé entre nous et nos pères
Que c'est eux qui ont faussés nos repères/ Le mal est fait mais personne ne le répare
On a tous été leurrés par l'Europe et sa clarté/ De celle-ci ils nous ont tous bien écartés
Nous plaçant dans les coins sombres, les coins lugubres et les sales quartiers/ Heureusement qu'on a su rester ensemble pour pouvoir s'entraider
C'est clair que l'envie de tout réduire en cendres/ Nous a maintes maintes fois traversé l'esprit
On voulait mettre mettre le feu pour que jamais ils n'oublient

[Chorus 1]

J'reste le bras en l'air et le poing serré/ Pour les têtes tombées et les mains coupées
J'reste le bras en l'air et le poing serré/ Pour nos tribus enchaînées et nos peuples asservis
J'reste le bras en l'air et le poing serré/ Pour nos frères lynchés et nos familles exilées
J'reste le bras en l'air et le poing serré/ J'reste le poing serré

[Verse 2]

C'est hallucinant, ils prennent les Mamadou et les changent en Laurent, Simon/ Il paraît que ça rend plus doux. Et pour les choses d'intellect c'est non
C'est bien connu on est bon qu'à être dehors/ On est bon qu'à faire du sport et de la chanson
Mais bon on a beau faire des efforts/ Les chances sont minces pour que les choses changent
Les gens sont si aigris, si encore maintenant ils crient / Qu'on est la cause de leurs crimes, ils nous accusent à leur guise
Ils nous accusent alors qu'ils nous enculent encore/ Ils continueront tant qu'ils verront qu'on reste tranquilles, dociles

Avec ça ils demandent qu'on s'incline devant leur drapeau/ Mais leur histoire de patrie ça me concerne pas trop
Mon combat est ailleurs, loin de leur pensée/ Je ne suis qu'un jeune héritier du passé encore irrité par ses mensonges et ses vérités

[Chorus 2]
J'reste le bras en l'air et le poing serré/ Pour nos mères souillées et nos terres dépouillées
J'reste le bras en l'air et le poing serré/ Pour le sang versé, pour les larmes qu'ont coulées
J'reste le bras en l'air et le poing serré/ Pour nos richesses volées et nos sœurs violées
J'reste le bras en l'air et le poing serré/ J'reste le poing serré

[Verse 3]
Ça sent le gouffre, ça sent le soufre/ A quand l'explosion, ils veulent qu'on pète les plombs
Qu'on complète les cellules de leurs prisons/ Pour qu'ils jettent sur nous leur regard méprisant
Mais puissant, dans l'âme on reste forts/ Puisant dans les larmes de nos ancêtres [missing words]
On se remémore nos héros, ceux qui sont même morts sans laisser leur nom/ Faudrait qu'on tourne la page, on n'a pas fini d'écrire
Ça sera pas fini tant que des cris viendront accompagner les pleurs/ On nous laisse boire et fumer pour nous faire oublier, pour nous faire plier à genoux mais jamais
Trop fiers et trop brillants à l'instar des Black Star/ Black Star bruyant, à l'instinct Negro Spirituel
Ghetto-blaster pour les miens et basta !

[Chorus 3]
J'reste le bras en l'air et le poing serré/ Contre la vérité voilée et leur histoire faussée
J'reste le bras en l'air et le poing serré/ Pour nos ethnies humiliées, décimées par milliers
J'reste le bras en l'air et le poing serré/ Pour nos gosses déshérités, nos héros assassinés
J'reste le bras en l'air et le poing serré/ J'reste le bras en l'air et le poing serré

English translation

[Verse 1]
Deep down it's that everything they do is designed to offend us/ That all they want to do is push us down
They hate us just because we're dark/ Our brothers betray us just because they're forced
To do it if they just want to fit in/ Deep down they're the ones who drove a wedge between us and our fathers

They're the ones who distorted our bearings/ The damage is done but nobody repairs it
We've all been lured by Europe and its clarity/ They've kept us all well away from it
Placing us in dark, gloomy corners and dirty neighborhoods/ Fortunately we've managed to stay together and help each other out
It's clear that the desire to burn everything to the ground/ Crossed our minds many many [sic] *time*
We wanted to set it set it on fire so they'd never forget

[Chorus 1]
I keep my arm in the air and my fist clenched/ For heads that have fallen and hands that have been chopped off
I keep my arm in the air and my fist clenched/ For our tribes in chains and our peoples enslaved
I keep my arm in the air and my fist clenched/ For our lynched brothers and our exiled families
I keep my arm in the air and my fist clenched/ I keep my fist clenched

[Verse 2]
It's amazing, they take the Mamadou and change them into Laurent, Simon/ Apparently that makes it softer and for intellectual things it's no
It's well known that we're only good at being outside/ We're only good at sports and singing
But no matter how hard we try/ The chances are slim that things will change
People are so bitter, if even now they shout/ That we're the cause of their crimes, they accuse us at will
They accuse us while they fuck us over again/ They will keep on doing it as long as they see we're quiet and docile
With this they demand that we bow to their flag/ But their story of homeland doesn't really concern me
My battle lies elsewhere, far from their thoughts/ I'm just a young heir to the past, still irritated by its lies and truths

[Chorus 2]
I keep my arm in the air and my fist clenched/ For our soiled mothers and our stripped lands
I keep my arm in the air and my fist clenched/ For the blood shed, for the tears spilled
I keep my arm in the air and my fist clenched/ For our stolen wealth and our raped sisters
I keep my arm in the air and my fist clenched/ I keep my fist clenched

[Verse 3]
It smells like the abyss, it smells like sulfur/ When the explosion, they want us to go berserk
To fill the cells of their prisons/ So that they cast their contemptuous gaze upon us
But we're strong at heart/ Drawing on the tears of our ancestors [missing words]

We remember our heroes, those who even died without leaving their names/ They would like us to turn the page, we haven't finished writing
It won't be over until the cries are accompanied by screams/ They let us drink and smoke to make us forget, to make us bend our knees but never
Too proud and too bright like Black Star/ Black Star noisy
Negro Spirituals instinct/ Ghetto-blaster for mine and basta! [i.e., that's it]

[Chorus 3]
I keep my arm in the air and my fist clenched/ Against the veiled truth and their distorted history
I keep my arm in the air and my fist clenched/ For our humiliated ethnic groups, decimated by the thousands
I keep my arm in the air and my fist clenched/ For our disinherited children, our murdered heroes
I keep my arm in the air and my fist clenched/ I keep my arm in the air and my fist clenched

- **"*Le vice*" [2001] – Starflam (featuring Profecy)**

[Verse 1: Baloji]
[…] *La mafia d'Etat, le sale mythe, le sale rabat-joie*
Mais tu sais de quoi j'ai envie, de pisser sur les élus/ De ce Dieu qui ferme les yeux sur la misère de ses enfants
De Palestine, de Panama ou du Kivu/ Ou même plus près de chez vous […]

- **"*L'eau qui dort*" [1995] – Malfrats Linguistiques**

[Verse 3: Seg]
Vous avez cru la ville de Liège incapable de faire face/ Au hip hop de la capitale qui est certes tenace
Home Sweet Home on est bien que chez soi/ Et on se permet de critiquer même quand on ne connait pas
[…] *Heureusement que certains posses n'ont pas oublié/ Le mot à la base du H.I.P. H.O.P. : unité*
[…] *L'esprit hip hop à Liège est de plus en plus fort/ La solidarité entre les groupes notre point fort*
[…]

- **"*Les blancs ne savent pas danser*" [2007] – James Deano**

[Chorus]
On dit que les blancs ne savent danser mais c'est faux

Tout le monde, tout le monde, tout le monde : c'est faux
La vérité tu la sais
C'est qu'les blancs n'savent pas danser
Le seul blanc qui sait danser
C'est Michael Jackson

[Verse 3]
[…] *Il paraît que James Brown faisait du plagiat, imitait John Travolta* […]

- **"*Les points sur les i*" [1996] – Daddy K**

[Verse 1]
[…] *Tu fais de la hip hop, tu critiques le top/ Tu rappes depuis quatre ans ça y est t'es un grand maintenant*
Non franchement renseigne toi s'il te plaît/ Mais sache qu'en 80 quand je breakais t'étais qu'un gamin
Et sache qu'aujourd'hui mec tu réagis en gamin/ A fond dans ce que je fais, à fond dans la Nation Zulu
Depuis quinze ans je m'adonne à la hip hop un point c'est tout/ Je sais, je sais, je fais du commercial : "oh oh"
Laisse tomber les ragots et viens remplir mon frigo/ Le business, comme tu dis, ne m'a pas enrichi
Il me permet de vivre et de pouvoir bouffer […]

- ***"Les princes-évêques"* [1993] – Seg and DJ Mig One**

[Verse 1]
[…] *Issus de la principauté de Liège, dont nous sommes originaires et dont nous sommes fiers*
Nous faisons partie d'une classe militante qui crie haut et fort à la gente gouvernante
Que nous sommes (oui nous sommes !) et que nous resterons révoltés face aux malheurs contre lesquels nous nous battons
C'est-à-dire l'injustice, la corruption de la police, sans oublier les méfaits que le gouvernement commet
Vis-à-vis des pauvres, de plus en plus pauvres, qui sombrent dans l'alcool et dont nous sommes les porte-paroles […]

[Verse 2]

Nous sommes les princes-évêques du rap, nos paroles frappent […]

- **"*L'immigré*" [1993] – Level Bass**

[Verse]

[…] *Un matin, avec amour, mon père me serre la main/ Il me dit mon fils, de ta patrie, de ton sang, tu es loin*

Aujourd'hui j'ai compris qu'il voulait mon bonheur/ Et ces paroles, pour toujours, résonnent dans mon cœur

Isolé, j'étais perdu, seul dans un monde lointain/ Ma vie ne connaissait ni soir ni matin

Certains m'appelaient Mohamed et puis d'autres "le frisé"/ Enfin ma cage de verre est à jamais brisée

Alors si comme moi tu gardes espoir pour demain/ Ensemble donnons un coup de pouce au destin

- **"*L'indélébile tras*" [1999] – Rival**

[Verse]

[…] *Front National casse le pays*

Aujourd'hui des émeutes, demain une guerre civile/ Personne n'est à l'abri, sur tous les toits tombe la pluie […]

- **"*Loin*" [1999] – Rival (featuring Akhenaton)**

[Verse 2: Akhenaton]

[…] *Qu'nous sommes dans le vrai depuis longtemps*

Et qu'ils s'la coulent douce/ Mais nous à leurs yeux plein de merde on reste d'autres Zulus de plus

[…]

- **"*Liège-Bruxelles-Gand*" [2007] – Baloji**

[Chorus 1]

Mon point de départ, mon point de chute

Liège me contient, me rapproche de mon but

Mon point de départ, mon point de chute

Liège

[Verse 2]

Comme les italiens avant nous, le racisme se refourgue/ On est les seuls négros dans ce quartier d'bourges

Ils appellent ça de la discrimination positive/ Mais à l'époque c'est une exception, un fait d'archive

Liège, ma petite Sicile, où l'horizon se cache derrière des terrils/ Mais les nonos ont le teint d'sang, des fossettes dans les paumes

La relève s'est fait surprendre/ Partout où je vais c'est Liège que je lègue

Il neige sur Liège des flocons d'alu/ Sous le nez des élus l'héro suit sa plus-value

Dans notre capitale, des travaux inutiles/ Les stewards, se prennent pour des flics en civil

Les subsides vont à l'opéra qui tournent les privilèges/ Pendant que les MJC remplacent les collèges

[…]

- **"*Ma part du ghetto*" [2003] – Pitcho**

[Chorus]

Tiens, v'la ma part du ghetto, j't'la donne

J't'la donne, j't'en fais cadeau

A condition de repartir avec ma part du gâteau

"C'est dans l'underground que j'ai choisi mon camp"

[Verse 2]

J'te donne même ma part de joie et de gaieté/ Même si c'est la misère qui vient me guetter

[…] *Et si j'suis monté au mic'/ C'est pour retranscrire les faits comme une caméra*

Sans fiction, pas de ragots ni de commérages/ Sans montage, rien que des rushs bruts comme la rage

[…]

- **"*MEVTR*" [2020] – Damso**

[Verse 1]

[…] *Bâtons dans les roues, ok (ok), genou sur le cou, ok (ok)/ On a brisé les chaînes hier, aujourd'hui on brise le silence (fuck, yeah)*

[Verse 2]

[…] *Petit, j'n'ai pas eu besoin d'appartenance, juste besoin de faire du chiffre (moula)/ Mes meilleurs amis sont mes appartements, j'meurs, ils s'ront là pour mon fils (oh oui, Dems)*

- **"*Mourir au top*" [1999] – Rival (featuring Defi J)**

[Chorus]
Avant le rap, je représente le hip hop
Vivre en dessous de tout mais mourir au top
[…] *Rébellion souterraine, BRC, CNN*

- **"*Opération Starflam*" [1997] – Starflam**

[Verse 3: Kaer]
Ecoute bien ce style, écoute les rimes que l'on déverse/ Quand les locomotives passent 'vaut mieux pas que tu traverses
Starflam, arrive live dans ton Walkman/ Capte bien ces mots sinon mon crew entier te rétame […]

- **"*Ostende transit*" [2007] – Baloji**

[Verse 2]
Le fil de la vie m'étrangle/ J'en ai oublié mon pays et ma langue
Vu que les années ont défilé/ Mais en me voyant sur une chaîne câblée
Elle s'est dit aussi qu'il a tenu parole/ En m'éduquant, en me mettant à l'école
Sur la terre d'asile de son idole […]

- **"*Où tu crois qu'on va*" [2003] – CNN199**

[Verse 2: Ali Pacha]
[…] *On tombe de fatigue mais on se relève/ On lutte pour un même rêve de révolution dans les mentalités* […]

- **"*Paris c'est loin*" [2016] – Damso (featuring Booba)**

[Verse 2: Damso]
[…] *Très tôt déjà, j'ai connu le racisme en primaire : "Valérie avait peur du Noir"*
Mais ne parlait pas de lumière, les mots sont des lames qui aiguisent haine et colère […]

- **"*Peace in the World*" [1990] – M.C. Rayer (BRC)**

[Verse 2]

[…] *Et la rage je l'ai souvent comme en ce moment, c'est pour ça que j'arrive mieux à exprimer mes sentiments/ Et pour mieux les exprimer je les place dans mes raps*

Dans mes raps en français parce que c'est la seule langue que je connais/ Mais si en français je fais passer un message, c'dans l'espoir qu'un jour l'homme devienne un peu plus sage […]

- **"*Péril urbain*" [2001] – Starflam**

Original lyrics

[Verse 5: Baloji]

[…] *Ressens la teneur du rap de l'indigent/ Fustigeant les dirigeants, cette politique corrigeant*

Les opposants à ce fonctionnement inhérent aux ignorants/ Qui me classe, moi et mon clan, dans les rangs des belligérants

Ma parade face à l'Etat policier/ N'est que l'autogestion, l'autodéfense, l'autonomie

Donc quoi !? Soyons leaders de nos opinions/ Prenons la différence comme trait d'union

Pour ne plus que l'histoire se réitère/ Pour que mon rap contestataire fasse réagir les réactionnaires

Pose, pose un bémol, propose une clef à ceux que le système immole/ Qui tentent de rayer les valeurs du passé au Détol

Faire le nettoyage par le vide, sortir de l'inertie/ De cette parano ambiante et de cette bureaucratie

Qui tente de faire croire que le fonctionnement actuel/ Est celui pour lequel les gens ont voté

Et pourquoi le saboter ?/ Parce que faute d'avoir le droit de voter

On tente de s'immiscer, donner notre avis au M.I.C./ Clamer que la politique à grande échelle n'est qu'un folklore

Palissade des lobbies de pouvoir qui explorent/ Les limites humaines à l'extrême

Voir jusqu'où on peut s'organiser face aux dilemmes/ Peuple d'automates mais j'en vois les stigmates

Au-delà des fissures et des brèches que colmatent/ Ces élus tous fringants qui se pavanent en beuglant

Mais pour eux mon slogan reste cinglant :/ "Clandestins à Laeken, Fabiola à Vottem"

Ton système je ken, ses projets, ses barèmes/ L'opium du peuple, le chômage et le shit

Le sexe et les vidéo-clips, de quoi tu flippes ?/ Il neige sur Liège des flocons d'alu

Sous le nez des élus, l'héro suit sa plus-value/ Ce qui me pousse à clamer que le désordre est voulu

Plus que jamais, le désordre est voulu

English translation

[Verse 5: Baloji]

[…] *Feel the tenor of the pauper's rap*/ *Criticizing the leaders, this policy correcting*

Opponents of this inherent functioning of the ignorant/ *That classifies me and my clan in the ranks of the belligerent*

My response to the police state/ *Is self-management, self-defense and autonomy*

So what? Let's be leaders of our opinions/ *Let's use difference as a unifying force*

So that history doesn't repeat itself/ *So that my protest rap makes reactionaries react*

Pose, pose a flat, propose a key to those whom the system immolates/ *Who try to wipe out the values of the past with Dettol* [i.e., brand of disinfectant and antiseptic products]

Cleansing through emptiness, breaking out of inertia/ *From this ambient paranoia and bureaucracy*

Who try to make people believe that the way things are/ *Is the one people voted for*

And why sabotage it?/ *Because without the right to vote*

We try to interfere, to give our opinion to the M.I.C./ *Claim that large-scale politics is just folklore*

Palisade of power lobbies exploring/ *Human limits to the extreme*

See how far we can organize in the face of dilemmas/ *People of automatons, but I see the stigma*

Beyond the cracks and breaches that are being plugged/ *These dashing elected officials who strut and bellow*

But for them my slogan remains scathing:/ *"Undocumented immigrants in Laeken* [i.e,. municipality of Brussels], *Fabiola* [i.e., former queen of the Belgians] *in Vottem* [i.e., village in Liège]*"*

I fuck your system, its projects, its scales/ *The opium of the people, unemployment and weed*

Sex and music videos, what are you afraid of?/ *It's snowing aluminum flakes in Liège*

Under the noses of elected officials, heroin is gaining in value/ *Which leads me to proclaim that disorder is deliberate*

More than ever, disorder is wanted

- **"*Phlashman*" [1990] – De Puta Madre (featuring DJ Grazzhoppa)**

[Outro: Sozyone]

[Scratches by DJ DJ Grazzhoppa] *Et pour tous les jeunes, écoutez !* [scratches stop suddenly]/ *Et pour tous les jeunes, écoutez-moi bien !*

Mon frère ne blague pas avec les beurs/ *Ni avec les blancs, ni avec les noirs, c'est un homme du désert*

- **"*Pinocchio*" [2015] – Booba (featuring Damso and Gato)**

[Verse 2: Damso]

[…] *Connexion Bruxelles jusqu'à Aulnay-sous-Bois* […]

- **"*Poséidon*" [2015] – Damso**

[Verse 1]

Je n'ai jamais tort, y'a qu'la mort qui aura raison de moi/ "On n'a pas l'même sort" m'a dit l'daron, fils, n'oublie pas qu't'es renoi […]

[Chorus]

J'suis Poséidon, avec beaucoup plus de flow
Quand il s'agit de pognon, j'en veux toujours plus qu'il n'en faut
[…] *Toujours plus de seille-o, j'en veux toujours plus qu'il n'en faut*
Toujours plus de bédo, j'en veux toujours plus qu'il n'en faut […]

[Verse 2]

[…] *Derrière les barreaux, c'est c'que j'risque quand j'vends d'la shnouf en semaine/ Donc j'me tiens à carreaux, comme la chemise de Snoop dans "What's My Name"* […]

- **"*Repris de justesse*" [2007] – Baloji**

[Verse 1]

Ok, yo, ce couplet est coupé à peau et à sang/ Pour sceller mon sort de ressortissant
Vu que nos droits ici sont bannis/ Vu qu'ils nous chassent comme dans le Mississippi
Encerclé par les circulaires et les formulaires/ Repli sécuritaire, république bananière mais
La double peine fait double emploi/ Leurs doubles jeux ne m'ont pas laissé de choix
Mais mon visa d'étude n'est pas valable/ Vu que ma demande ici est irrecevable
Mais peu de chances qu'ils me régularisent/ L'idée de tout quitter me dépayse
Celle de tout perdre, perdre mes repères/ J'suis un étranger des deux côtés de la frontière
Donc j'espère

[Verse 2]

[…] *Dans la capitale, on vit sous l'manteau/ A confondre une église et un petit château*
Ils disent qu'on est des hommes libres et égaux/ Mais la réalité est loin de ce portrait-robot
[…] *J'viens pas des Emirats, au-delà des quotas/ Fini comme Semira donc dans ce cas* […]

[Verse 3]

[…] *Je veux répondre, il me dit : "Ferme ta gueule*
On t'ramène d'où tu viens, sale bougnoule"/ Mais ce n'est qu'en arrivant au centre que je m'écroule
[…] *Je suis un détenu qu'on appelle un résident/ Et les matons ici des aides-soignants*
Mais le système est malade, mais je reste lucide/ Car leurs décrets ont l'effet d'un pesticide
Pour qu'on reste sur la touche ou derrière la ligne
[…] *Nos pro-deo sont mal informés/ Ils le savent, ils le savent*

- **"*Rien ne va plus*" [1999] – Rival**

[Verse 2]
[…] *Tu comprendras qu'c'est pas pour le style qu'on clame : "nique police et politiques"*
[…] *Fais le pas pour moi mais pour le hip hop et ses gens* […]

[Verse 3]
[…] *Le monde semble si sombre des fois, on s'accroche à c'qu'on trouve/ Moi c'est le hip hop pour que l'œil, l'esprit et le cœur s'ouvrent* […]

- **"*Roi des Belges*" [2013] – G.A.N**

[Verse 1]
Seigneur faut combien sur l'échelle de Richter/ Pour déplacer toutes ces montagnes
[…] *Roi des Belges mais j'couperai pas d'bras/ Je veux vivre et mourir à Kinshasa*
Seigneur dis-moi comment est mort Lumumba/ Et si moi aussi la Belgique me tuera […]
[Chorus]
Wow, pourquoi autant de poèmes ?
Ils veulent tous ma peau, ma couleur attire la haine
A la fin d'mes sons j'les entends crier "Amen"
Ils regardent vers le ciel, espèrent revoir G.A.N
Roi des Belges, le, le Roi des Belges [X2]

[Verse 2]
[…] *Je veux vendre des disques comme on vend des frites*
Comme Semira beaucoup d'affaires étouffées […]

- **"*Smog*" [2018] – Damso**

[Verse 1]

Pas d'direction, j'connais qu'la flèche de mon oint-j/ Motivation : sang de fils de pute sur mon linge (fils de putain)

J'connais la chanson : "Sales négros, rentrez chez vous"/ Billets de cinq cents : "Sales négros, bienvenue chez nous" (bienvenue chez nous ouais)

J'suis plus dans l'tier-quar, Castelo de São Jorge/ J'tire sur un pétard, c'est la violence, maux de gorge (mal à la tête)

[…] *C'est toujours Dems, négro, qu''importe, c'est toujours Dems (c'est toujours lui)/ Même dans la dèche, on s'en sort, thon, pâtes, crème fraîche (oui je connais)*

Ça tire la nuit, ça tire l'après-m', ça tire le jour (c'est bang bang bang)/ Tellement de guerres, mon peuple est mort, à qui le tour ?

Ouais (ouais)

- **"*Solo*" [2020] – Lous and The Yakuza**

[Chorus]

Quoi que l'on dise, on restera solo

Quoi que l'on fasse, on restera solo (ice ice)

Solo, solo (ice ice)

Solo, solo

[Verse 1]

[…] *Pourquoi le noir n'est-il pas une couleur de l'arc-en-ciel ?*

[Bridge]

Que Dieu m'éloigne du chemin de la vengeance

Leur rendre la pareille, c'est tentant

Dois-je crier pour qu'on m'entende ?

Six, zéro : année d'l'indépendance

- **"*Stressact*" [1997] – Bienvenu-N-Sonar**

[Verse 2: Bienvenu]

[…] *Il était prédit qu'en tant qu'immigré je serai lésé/ Mon échappatoire repose sur la plume et l'encrier*

[…] *Merde, la crise s'installe, on fait ses malles/ Réfugiés et sans papiers représentent le mal* […]

- **"*Tant de haine*" [1996] – Defi J & The Def Rock Posse**

[Verse 3: Defi J]

[…] *Garde ton mépris, n'as-tu pas encore compris/ Que plus tu me critiques, plus je rappe, j'écris et je te nie*

Revendiquant le respect qui manque avec la force d'un gang/ Tirant des phrases en guise d'obus sans boucherie pour atteindre mes buts

Oui je rappe avec autorité quitte à me contenter des minorités/ A l'oreille aiguisée habituées à être discriminées depuis des années

Et si un jour tu m'reconnais

- **"*Tout ceci ne vous rendra pas le Congo*" [2007] – Baloji**

[Intro]

Bienvenue à l'Hôtel Impala/ De retour au point de départ

Comme au point de non-retour/ Auto-bio fournie d'une vie

Hôtel Impala volume 1/ De Lubumbashi à Liège

Baloji [X3]

Ecoute-moi [X3]

[Intro: verse 1]

J'ai beau fermer les yeux, j'ai encore ces visions/ De corps avachis sur le sol de la route de la perdition

Et j'ai hurlé comme après ma circoncision/ J'suis entouré de fantômes ou est-ce la mort qui fait apparition ?

J'en ai pissé dans mon lit, sommeil interrompu/ Et j'ai du mal à en parler à bâtons rompus

Août 89, j'm'en souviens/ J'étais pris de crampes, un talon sur la tempe

A implorer que les enfants décampent/ Ils ont voulu nous humilier à travers nos descendances

Que les ovaires de nos femmes soient souillés de leurs semences/ Depuis ce jour, j'dis qu'notre famille est maudite

La mort gravite autour de nous et je l'sens

[Intro: verse 2]

Après les pillages, j'suis retourné au village/ J'ai abandonné Lucienne, les enfants et mon pays d'ancrage

Prétextant que l'armée chassait les Kasaïens/ Mais ce que j'ai fui m'a rattrapé par un autre moyen

Preuve en est, même si le pays est divisé/ Mon fils aîné de 13 ans est rentré dans une de leurs unités

Pardonne ma lâcheté/ Au pays de la devise et de la débrouillardise

On n'a pas attendu Ebay, pour faire du troc/ J'passe du chantier à la cuisine, du ciment au manioc

Faut investir dans l'avenir comme l'dit le Front Commun/ J'répare un camion pour faire dans les transports en commun

J'viendrai chez vous dès que mes papiers seront fixés/ T-shirt à l'effigie de Lumumba et leur faire oublier le Che

J'rêve de jouer au Lotto, boire de cette bière/ Du temps de l'Union Minière et du M.P.R.

Visiter votre Matongé, chaussée d'Ixelles/ Donne-moi de tes nouvelles, par téléphone ou par mails

Que Dieu te garde, tu restes dans mes prières/ Je t'embrasse

[Chorus]

Même si l'Occident a bon dos

Ça ne vous rendra pas le Congo

Le pillage de nos minéraux, de nos lingots

Ça ne vous rendra pas le Congo

Et reproduire les schémas coloniaux

Ça ne vous rendra pas le Congo

Car la terreur vue d'ici c'est comme la terre vue du ciel

Ça paraît loin de nous, ça paraît irréel

[Verse 2]

Les enfants de la Libération n'jouent pas aux indiens/ Ils voient l'Europe comme le Far West en vain et pour rien

En attendant leur chèque de la Western Union/ Rêvent de dévaliser une délégation

Disent le pays en transition, la guerre est une escale/ Pour cet idéal, passe au plan Marshall

Le règne du Maréchal l'a laissé bancal/ Et disent que l'Unesco n'aide que les pays cartes postales

Au lieu de s'affairer aux affaires courantes/ Car un tiers du pays est sans courant, ni eau courante

Les guerres ethniques renforcent le statu quo/ Le Congo est un terrain de Stratego

Tous ses pays voisins devenus rivaux/ Dans le pillage de ses minéraux, de ses lingots

Et ça dégringole, le pays est sous contrôle/ Et c'est pire qu'au temps de Léopold

Entre la loi de la jungle et celle des protocoles/ La révolution a besoin de bénévoles

Et tant que l'opinion publique abdique/ Le Congolais reste le nègre de l'Afrique

[Verse 3]

Tous Congolais à part entière, tous apparentés/ Laissons nos différends à part, on a un pays à remonter

Pendant que les virus se donnent comme des prospectus/ Les nouveaux missionnaires font de leur Emmaüs

[…] *Notre développement est à l'arrêt comme la Gécamines/ Complexés par notre taux de mélanine*

L'intégration passera par l'argent/ Mais la détermination reste le facteur déterminant

- **"*Vénal*" [2021] – AMB'N (Prophesy)**

[Intro]

Je prie que le ciel pardonne ce que l'on est devenu/ Depuis qu'on ne poursuit que le gain (moula, money, dinero)

Obsédé par le matériel (merde), pour quelques billets de vives couleurs/ Dans le sang on baigne (bang, bang)

[Verse 1]

Ma devise c'est "Me, Myself and I"/ Fuck le monde et ses souffrances, moi je focus sur mes bails (focus sur mes bails)

Rien à foutre de vos guerres, de vos maladies/ Moi je me mets au vert et profite de ma vie

Vue sur la playa, carré VIP/ 20 à l'heure à bord d'un prototype […]

[Chorus]

Nigga me, me (me, me, me)

C'est chacun pour soi

Donc "Me, Myself and I"

[Bridge]

J'répète c'est "Me, Myself and I"/ Fuck le monde et ses souffrances, moi je focus sur mes bails

Tu t'prends pour un activiste ? T'as un t-shirt Black Fist/ Mais t'as jamais fait de sacrifices qui ne soient pas dans ton bénéfice

[Verse 2]

So calla te la boca (shh), ne viens pas me faire la morale/ Sur ton putain de piédestal en sirotant du Coca-Cola

Va donc t'attaquer aux marchands de mort qui profitent des misères de la guerre […]
Tu t'identifies au drame du moment : "Suis-je le plus médiatisé ?"/ Tantôt Panaméen, tantôt Kenyan, tu postes, t'es pas là pour manifester
Militantisme virtuel (hey, hey) comme toute ta vie (bitch)/ Illusion perpétuelle (hey, hey) pour des bons avis (check)

- **"*Vie*" [2020] – Damso**

[Pre-chorus]
Eh, la vie de bandit
Les peines lourdes et les pleurs, daronne apeurée

[Chorus]
C'est pas ma vie, c'est pas la mienne
Pourquoi ils veulent toujours que j'foute la merde ?

[Verse 2]
[…] *Faux négros manquent d'hygiène, toujours à squatter la gare, les huissiers à midi/ La daronne est fière, maintenant, notaires prennent en selfie, j'ouvre des SP sans faire de crédit*
Maintenant, notaires prennent en selfie, maintenant, les bourgmestres prennent en selfie/ Mais où est-c'qu'ils étaient quand j'voulais les papiers ? Ah, bah ouais
J'ai dû les croire mais sans y croire, rouler des pétards dans les auditoires/ Sablier noir, de désespoir, dans la mémoire, de la gare à la gloire

- **"*Vous êtes fous!*" [1990] – Benny B (featuring DJ Daddy K)**

Original lyrics

[Intro: Daddy K]
"Ladies and gentlemen"
"DJ Daddy K"
"Mais qui l'accompagne?"

[Verse 1]
Benny B/ B-E-2N-Y-B, mon nom à moi, c'est Benny B, oui tu l'as deviné

Comme toi je veux la justice, j'essaye de défendre mes droits/ Partout où tu vois la foule, c'est qu'on parle de moi

Je descends des quartiers soit disant mal fréquentés/ Où la P.J. y passe les trois-quarts de la journée

Mais j'en ai marre de tout ça, j'en ai marre de cette vie-là/ Et pour sortir de cette impasse, je ferais n'importe quoi

[Chorus: Daddy K]

"Mais vous êtes fous ?"

"Oh oui"

"Mais vous êtes fous"

[Verse 2]

Merde, quand je vois dans la rue tous ces jeunes qui errent/ Qui restent là à ne rien foutre, moi je crie colère

Car tous ces farceurs ne savent pas qu'il reste encore une chance/ Ils n'en n'ont rien à cirer, pour eux ça n'a pas d'importance

Mais je ne suis pas comme eux, je veux me défoncer/ Je ferai tout ce que je peux pour que ça puisse marcher

Montrer à tous ces bailleurs que le monde est beau/ Qu'une fois que c'est parti, tu te sens le plus fort

[Verse 3]

Je fais partie des B-Boys, c'est un style qu'on redoute/ A la radio, à la TV si jamais tu nous écoutes

Je veux que tu penses à nous/ Et que tu dises une fois pour toute

Aux gens qui nous aiment pas qu'on poursuivra notre route/ Oui c'est du rap français

Plus fort que jamais/ Apportant avec lui le fond de tous ses secrets

Mais nous les B-Boys on ne peut s'empêcher d'écouter/ Si tu comprends pas, hey, c'est que t'es pas branché

English translation

[Verse 1]

B-E-2N-Y-B, my name is Benny B, yes you guessed it/ Like you I want justice, try to defend my rights

Wherever you see the crowd, they're talking about me/ I come down from the so-called bad neighborhoods

Where the P.J. [i.e., Judicial Police] *spends three-quarters of the day/ But I'm tired of it all, I'm tired of this life*

And to get out of this dead end, I would do anything

[Verse 2]

Shit, when I see all these young people wandering the streets/ Who stand there doing nothing, I shout out in anger

Because all these jokers don't know that there is still a chance/ They don't care, it doesn't matter to them

But I'm not like them, I wanna go all out/ I'll do everything I can to make it work

Show all those lessors that the world is beautiful/ That once it's gone, you feel the strongest

[Verse 3]

I'm one of the B-Boys, it's a style that's feared/ On the radio, on TV if you ever listen to us

I want you to think of us/ And I want you to tell once and for all

To the people who don't like us that we'll go on our way/ Yes this is French rap [i.e., Francophone rap]

Stronger than ever/ Bringing with it the bottom of all its secrets

But we B-Boys can't help but listen/ If you don't understand, hey, you're not hip [i.e., trendy]

- **"*Zorolerenarr*" [1994] – De Puta Madre**

[Verse 3: Smimooz]

[…] *Zorro va tout fusiller, Zorro va tout redresser/ La veuve et l'orphelin ne devront plus pleurer*

[…] *Et pour faire passer ses idées c'est sans hésitation/ Qu'il colle une raclée aux oppresseurs de la nation*

[…] *Toujours classe dans la protection de la population/ Et souvent de la loi il fait une violation* […]

Section 2

Translation lexicon

As explained in the methodology chapter of the main text, the purpose of this translation lexicon is to explain certain translation choices, or non-translation choices, that I made when translating from French to English. The particularity of the terms included here therefore lies in the potential political dimension of their interpretation depending on the context in which they are used.

- **"*Babtou*":** This word is a French and Francophone back slang, called "*verlan*"[322] in French, used to refer to white Europeans and, by extension, people identified as Westerners. It originates from the word "*toubab*", a term used in West Africa derived from the Mandinka and Wolof languages, which refers to anyone with white skin. Recently added to French dictionaries, the word *babtou* can be used in French slang in both a pejorative and a familiar and/or affectionate way. When Isha uses the expression "my *babtou*" in the song "*L'augmentation, pt. 1*" (2017), it is therefore in a familiar and affectionate context, as he uses it to refer to a close member of his team. In order to reflect the meaning of this use of the term by the artist, I decided to leave it as is in my English translation.

- **"*Beur(s)*":** This word is a *verlan* of the word "*Arabe*" (strictly reversed as "*be-ra-a*", with phonetic nuance to make it sound like "*beur*") used to refer to European individuals with ancestors who emigrated from the Maghreb region, or, by extension, who have Arab origins. Although it may be considered pejorative and racist depending on the context, its use in the cases identified in the main text is more a matter of familiar slang from that era, used to emphasize the interculturality experienced by those who use the term. It is therefore to reflect this intention that I have decided to leave the French wording of this word unchanged. Since *verlan* is originally a slang language, when the word "*beur*" finally entered French dictionaries, it was verlanized again to become "*rebeu*" in the 2000s.

[322] *Verlan* involves reversing the syllables of words to create new ones. The term itself is a *verlan* for the French adverbial phrase "*à l'envers*", meaning backwards.

- **"Black man" to translate "*black*":** In French slang, the English word "black"[323] can be used to refer to people of sub-Saharan African origins without necessarily implying a racist connotation. It is in this context that Daddy K uses it in the song "*Je me sens bien*" (1996) to denounce acts of racist violence. For this reason, I specified "black man" in my English translation to avoid giving the term a pejorative meaning contrary to the tone given to it by the artist.

- **"Bling-bling":** It is interesting to note that the English slang expression "bling-bling" has been popularized in the French language and included in French dictionaries thanks to the commercial success of rap music. It is used to describe something or someone flashy, ostentatious, or pretentious.

- **"Dump" to translate "*bled*":** The word "*bled*" is a French slang that can refer to the country of origin, or a small, isolated, and rural village. It comes from Arabic, where it means country or region. Depending on the context, its meaning in French slang can be pejorative or, on the contrary, positive and/or emotional. The meaning of this word is thus similar to that of a "ghetto". Since Baloji uses this word in a rather negative way in the song "*La corde raide*" (1997), linking it to the idea of stagnation and immobility, I chose to translate it into English as "dump".

- **"Dirty nigger(s)" to translate "*sale bougnoul*" and "*sales négros*":** The word "*bougnoul(e)*" is a well-known French racist insult from the colonization addressed to people with African descent. The term originally comes from the Wolof language, in which it means "black". Thus, when Baloji uses the French racist expression "*sale bougnoul*" in the song "*Repris de justesse*" (2007), it can be translated in English by "dirty nigger". In the same way, Damso uses the expression "*sales négros*" in the song "Smog" (2018), which can also be translated by "dirty niggers" in this context[324].

- **"Francophone rap" to translate "*rap français*":** When Benny B released the song "*Ecoute! C'est du rap français*" ["Listen! It's Francophone rap"] in 1990, the intention

[323] See below for other linked words.
[324] See above and below for other linked words.

was to affirm the existence of rap music in the French language in the context of the emergence of hip hop culture in France and Francophone Belgium. Therefore, given that Benny B was active in Francophone Belgium rather than France, I chose to translate the expression "*rap français*" used by Benny B as "Francophone rap", and not "French rap".

- **"Gangstas" used as "*gangsters*":** The choice of the term "gangstas" as a translation of "*gangsters*" as used in the original French text is explained by my desire to better reflect the meaning of this term in the general context of the lyrics of the song "*Karaktère K*" (1993) by K Particulier. Indeed, the artist refers to certain clichés surrounding gangsta rap culture and practice in the early 1990s in order to affirm that his vision of hip hop is not about showing off to feed one's ego, but rather about organizing oneself in order to express and convey ideas and messages of social criticism. While the French "gangster" is actually considered as an Anglicism, I thus preferred to choose "*gangstas*" as a slang equivalent that seems to me more relevant in this context.

- **"*Ghetto-blaster*" used as "boombox"**: A boombox is a portable music player for radio, cassette tapes or CDs, with a carrying handle, generally powered by batteries and designed to take music on the move to any location. Introduced to the American market in the late 1970s, the democratization of the boombox coincides perfectly with the massive spread of hip hop arts and culture since the releases of "Rapper's Delight" and "The Message". The use of boomboxes quickly became associated with a cultural practice in urban societies in the United States, particularly in African American and Latino ghettos and urban communities and participated therefore to the rise of hip hop music. In French, we commonly use the word "ghetto-blaster" to designate boomboxes. Obviously, this Francophone usage of the word demonstrates an association with urban and social environments akin to "ghettos," and, consequently, with certain stigmatizing ideas surrounding it. Nevertheless, the use of the word *ghetto-blaster* can also have a positive connotation depending on the context. It is therefore in this positive sense that Pitcho uses it in the song "*Le bras en l'air, poing serré*" (2003).

- **"I was breaking" to translate "*je breakais*"**: I think this translation is worth mentioning because it illustrates how a word from the specific language of hip hop culture and its artistic practices can be localized into French and reused according to

French grammatical rules. Indeed, Daddy K uses the expression "*je breakais*" in the song "*Les points sur les i*" (1996), which illustrates the transition from a localized English word to a French verb conjugated according to the personal pronoun to which it refers. The same observations can be made for other words and verbs from hip hop arts and culture, such as "*scratcher*" (i.e., to scratch), "*graffer*" (i.e., to graff), or, of course, "*rapper*" (i.e., to rap).

- **"*Khoya(s)*"**: This word is a French slang derived from the Arabic and meaning "brother(s)", or "bro(s)", in the general sense of close friend. I chose to leave the French wording of this word because its use by Rival in the song "*Comme on est venu*" (2003) can also be understood in the specific post-migration context of Francophone Belgium, where certain terms from languages spoken in the Maghreb region have been localized for usage in French.

- **"*Métissage*", "*métis*"**: In order to avoid the reductive and explicit racial connotations that certain general translations of the concept of *métissage* into English may carry (e.g. "mixed-race"; "interbreeding"), I have decided to leave the French wording in the main text. In this sense, I use the term "*métis*" to refer to people of African and European ethnic origins in these cases[325].

- **"Negro", "nigga", and "nigger" to translate "*négro*", "*renoi*", and "*nègre*":** As mentioned above in this lexicon, racist insults such as "*sale bougnoul*" or "*sale nègre*/*négro*" can be translated as "dirty nigger". These cases are interesting because they allow us to revisit certain nuances in the use of the terms "*nègre*" and "*négro*" in French. Although mostly used as an insult in French, the word "*nègre*" can be understood, in certain specific cases, in a descriptive way without the user necessarily using it in a pejorative manner. This is the case, for example, with Pitcho's album and song *Crise de nègre* (2010). For this reason, I opted for the English translation *Negro Crisis* instead of "Nigger Crisis". In the song "*Au fil de l'histoire*" (1994), although Monsieur R uses the term "*nègre*" in French, I also opted for the term "negro" in English because I felt that the artist was using the word in a descriptive rather than insulting sense, as a translation using the term "nigger" might have implied.

[325] I am therefore not referring to the indigenous people of Canada known as the Métis.

Regarding the French term "*négro*", it can be used in a pejorative and insulting way or, on the contrary, in a positive and familiar way, to signify a marker of belonging, for example. In the latter cases, I decided to translate "*négro*" as "nigga" because this choice seemed to me to be the most appropriate to reflect the meaning given to the word in the original French text. The same reasoning allows me to explain that when the *verlan* word "*renoi*" (i.e., "*noir*" in French for "black" in English) is used in French, I also translate it as "nigga" in English. Indeed, according to the context of use, "*négro*" and "*renoi*" can be considered as slang terms in French that do not necessarily convey a desire to stigmatize or discriminate according to the racial hierarchy scale, as shown with the example of the song "*Poséidon*" (2015) by Damso. Furthermore, the English word "nigga" is itself sometimes used as such in Francophone slang inspired by hip hop arts and culture, demonstrating the localization of a term derived from contemporary American English. An example of this dynamic can be found in the song "*Vénal*" (2021) by Prophesy. As explained in the main text, the use of this term attests then to a process of reversing stigma.

- **"Peace":** As shown by the title of the song "*Je crie* peace" (1991) by Rayer, it is interesting to note that the word "peace" in its English form is sometimes used as such in French, rather than its translation: "*paix*". This can be explained by the artists' desire to reach and be understood by as many people as possible, as evidenced by the title of another song by Rayer, which uses the English expression "Peace in the World" (1990). This literal use of the word "peace" in French within Francophone Belgian hip hop culture since its emergence attests to the spread of the philosophical credo of the nascent "hip hop nation" as advocated by the UZN and its various branches around the world.