Utrecht University
Faculty of Humanities
MA Thesis, Cultural History and Heritage

“Rendons à Césaire ce qui appartient à Césaire”

The construction and reception of dissonant memories in French rap

J.L.R Allasia – 6861350

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Supervisor: Dr. Rachel A. Gillett

Second reviewer: Dr. Pieter A. Huistra

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On the first page: Kery James in the video clip of "Musique Nègre" (2016) – screenshot form YouTube (top). Cover of Médine's album *Arabian Panther* (2008) – from www.discogs.com (bottom left). Youssoupha in the video clip of "Musique Nègre" (2016) – screenshot from YouTube (bottom right)

On the second page: Martin Luther King, Jr – from www.britannica.com (top). Newton P. Huey – from www.wikipedia.com (bottom left). Thomas Sankara – from www.wikipedia.com (bottom right)

Foreword

The idea of studying the postcolonial critique in French rap emerged in my head when listening to Gaël Faye, and specifically to his song "Irruption" (2017). It sounded to me like an anthem for the population of the Parisian suburbs (the *banlieue*), telling their hopes and their place in French society. I was also sensible to Faye's writing and his way of rapping, both calm and angry, determined. In the end, Faye was not included in this research, but I still chose some of his beautiful lines as epigraphs.

I discussed this topic with Rachel around the end of 2021 on the occasion of a "Thesis market" organised by our programme, which aimed to discuss eventual thesis topics with potential supervisors. I decided to attend even though, as a part-time student, I would not write my thesis until the academic year 2022-2023. Rachel's great enthusiasm for this topic reinforced my idea, and I could not wait to start researching it.

After the rebranding of the Master programme for 2022-2023, I was afraid I had to find another research topic (and I did have a plan B, which I would also be happy to delve into, but that's another story). Thanks to the coordinators' comprehension and Rachel's involvement, I was able to follow my original plan and write this research under her supervision. Thus, I am grateful first and foremost to Pieter Huistra and Rachel Gillett who allowed me to do this research.

Rachel has been such a great supervisor, providing in-depth and dense feedback, feeding me with references from her own research, and advising me to listen to podcasts, which truly changed everything. I am very grateful for her supervision. Her enthusiasm and expectations (from the other side of the Atlantic!) encouraged me to

do better, and I hope I did. This research went through a lot of back-and-forth and changes of focus, but I think I am quite happy with the result.

This research also challenged my own biases. I was already part of the French rap audience, but I realised I was (in a very large majority!) listening to rap made by White people. And this Master's thesis made me question that because when discovering different rappers and groups during my research I realised I liked them too. And I knew most of the names, but never actually listened to them before. Contrary to the popular formula, I think personal tastes should be discussed and come from somewhere. So, I started questioning my own biases, and I widened my taste in (French) rap music. Checking my own biases, questioning them, and changing personal aspects of my life is a result that I would expect from academic research, and I'm glad I could complete the whole "process" with this Master's thesis.

Finally, I would like to address additional thanks to Anouk Brodier, who took the time to discuss with me about her own Master's thesis (also supervised by Rachel) about the reappropriation of nationalism in French rap (1990-2012). She provided great insights and allowed me to better start my project.

And as always, thanks to my amazing partner for being the best, listening to my thesis-related complaints and delights, and more importantly supporting me through breakdowns and beyond.

Abstract

Rap music emerged in France in the 1980s and became more and more popular. It is a major genre in the current French musical landscape. From its origin, French rap has been a protest genre, denouncing the poverty in the *banlieues* and the discrimination towards Black, Arab, or Muslim people in France. This research draws on postcolonial and memory studies to offer an analysis of French rap as conveying a dissonant memory. Analysing the mention of antiracist and anti-colonial figures, it shows how Médine, Kery James and Youssoupha offer carefully curated memories of these figures through their songs. I examine to what extent their work contributes to the public debate on French colonial history.

Throughout the thesis I argue that rappers act as public historians and memory activists, transmitting to their audience the memory of historical events and figures that are marginalised in the French national narrative. Rappers contribute to memory work or *devoir de mémoire* of a dissonant memory by paying tribute to antiracist and anti-colonial leaders. Moreover, the artists place themselves in line with the anti-colonial and postcolonial struggles through reference to these figures, thus showing the continuity between past and current struggles in France. The figures are also used as cultural references. The thesis engages with song lyrics, popular press and YouTube responses, and with the rappers' biographies to show how they do memory work in France. It concludes that while rappers have a strong influence on public debate within their fan network, they are less influential in the wider public debate.

Keywords: dissonant memory; postcolonial critique; French rap; figures; reception

Table of contents

Introduction

The *Victoires de la Musique* is a very popular award ceremony held each year in France. It honours different artists, classified in categories such as "best female artist" or "best video clip", that have had a significant impact on the music industry that year. Recently, three actors from the rap music industry announced the creation of a new awards show, named "*Les Flammes*". They explained that, because of the gaps in the *Victoires*, their show would specifically honour "popular cultures", meaning "cultures from popular neighbourhoods" (Leboyer, 2023). The creators decided to propose a ceremony to celebrate these cultures and "the creativity of those who make it grow". This ceremony intends to celebrate rap music, but also "R'n'B, afro music, new pop and Caribbean music" (Leboyer, 2023). This parallel ceremony, not affiliated with the *Victoires de la Musique*, answers to an observation made by several artists and professionals from the hip-hop industry, that their music genres were not sufficiently represented in the existing *Victoires de la Musique*.

Discussions in France about popular music go beyond representation into the categorisation of musical genres. For example, in 2021 the Belgian afro-feminist Instagram account @tetonsmarrons posted about the "racism in the French music industry" (Matunga, 2021). This post criticised the categorisation of any music made by Black artists as "urban music" (a term often used for rap music), as the rapper Le Juiice denounced it in the radio emission *Planète Rap* on Skyrock. When the presenter claimed that the French singer Aya Nakamura was doing "urban music", she answered:

> "No, it's not urban music, she's singing, it's pop music. You are professionals in the music industry, but I feel like you don't know how to name the different musical scenes. Aya Nakamura is not a rapper, you know what rap is because you receive rappers here every day. Aya Nakamura doesn't do rap, she's doing zouk music, I want to say. She's a

> singer, but she's Black, so it's urban music, and that's it. It's a reality. And I can't even hold it against you, we're in France."

This strong claim Le Juiice made, supported by Ntumba Matunga (the Belgian journalist behind the Instagram account @tetonsmarrons), shows another aspect of the critiques held against the French music industry, which is strongly embodied by the *Victoires de la Musique* awards. The term "urban music" can be considered both racist and classist because it tends to designate any music made by Black (or at least non-White) people, therefore enclosing them in a specific genre without distinction. Moreover, this term stresses a spatial identity relating to socially deprived neighbourhoods at the margins of big cities (the *banlieues*), mainly Paris and Marseilless. This strongly refers to the imagery of the *banlieue* as a marginalised urban space, populated with people with an immigration background and riffed with violence. Thus, the use of "urban" to qualify a type of music refers more to a perceived spatial and social situation than to art. As Ntumba Matunga argues in her Instagram post, it shows the refusal to recognise the artistic value and diversity of music made by Black people, which would be reserved for White performers and creators (Matunga, 2021).

These two examples show the difficulties of recognising, classifying and institutionalising rap music in France, even though it has widely spread in the francophone world for several decades now (see Hammou, 2014; Hammou and Molinero, 2022; Molinero, 2018). The origins of these difficulties lie in representations of rap music by French media as a violent and problematic music genre often produced by non-White artists with an immigration background (Hammou, 2014; Hammou and Sonnette-Manouguian, 2022). These two factors have shaped French discourse on rap. Indeed, as rap music was spreading in the 1990s, it became a target for mass media that started depicting it as a violent protest music genre, originating from the suburbs

(*banlieues*) (Béru, 2011; Hammou and Sonnette-Manouguian, 2022; Kamecka, 2021). It has been associated with gang violence, social problems, and descendants of immigrants from the former French colonies (who were/are, indeed, mostly living in suburbs), refusing to integrate into French society (Hammou, 2014; Huq, 2006).

In parallel with this media representation, rap developed as protest music, denouncing racism and life in the *banlieues* and offering a critique of French society. More specifically, the postcolonial critique in French rap crystallised around the 2000s and helped place these issues in the public sphere (Djavadzadeh, 2015). The early 2000s consequently saw a widespread discussion about the French colonial past, in media and political spheres (see Bertrand, 2006; Blanchard, Bancel and Lemaire, 2006; Lotem, 2016). The 2000s was a period where the French historical canon was put into question, as it relies on the 19th-century national narrative aiming to create and emphasise a national feeling through great figures (Champier, 2020; Offenstadt, 2009). This entailed that figures or events that did not highlight France's greatness were discarded (Champier, 2020). Thus, the 2000s saw the complicated relationship of France with its colonial past and the tendency to stick to the Republican myth of colonisation as "positive", which led to the creation of new grassroots organisations shedding light on "colonial continuities" specifically in the treatment of people with an immigration background (see Hannoum, 2019; Lotem, 2016). These initiatives, without initially considering themselves as "memory activists" offered an alternative memory of French colonialism (Lotem, 2016).

By denouncing the French colonial system and its legacies in the current French society, rap artists propose a different memory of French colonial history. To do so, they use their individual experience of postcolonial French society. Historical

references to this period are often made by rap artists, pointing out systems that have contributed to systemic racism, such as colonisation or slavery. In addition to this historical critique, they also elevate figures of resistance against French colonialism as heroes, which takes work as some of them are little known in French society (see Béru, 2011; Kamecka, 2021; Mowang Ngoula, 2021). The analysis in this thesis shows that these figures and their use in French rap are a way to represent the French colonial past; as such, they provide different perspectives to the discussion of colonialism. The work of the three rappers present in my analysis tackles processes such as colonialism, enslavement, and the limits of citizenship, and offers a more complete French history than that mandated in the school of the Republic, a high place of transmission of the national narrative.

Drawing on postcolonial theories and memory activism, this research focuses on three major artists (Kery James, Médine, and Youssoupha) and examines the elaboration of anti-colonialist and antiracist figures in their songs, from 2007 onwards. Analysing how the artists present these figures and how they are positioned in relation to the French canon allows me to unveil memory-making processes outside or at the margin of this canon. Therefore, this research finds itself at the intersection of cultural, memory, and postcolonial studies. Moreover, my analysis suggests these songs contribute to a dissonant memory, putting forward figures and events marginalised in the French historical canon.

This research examines the following question: *What memories of anti-colonial and antiracist figures do rap artists offer through their songs and to what extent does it contribute to the public debate on French colonial history?* After presenting the

conceptual framework and the methods and sources, it offers three sections of evidence and interpretation before concluding.

The first part presents contextual and background elements: the first chapter deals with the development of rap music as a protest genre in France and explores how postcolonial critique emerged in this musical scene. The second chapter studies the relations of France with its colonial past and its uses in the present. It also offers insights into the current postcolonial critique diverging from the official memory of colonialism.

The second part is dedicated to rap songs analysis. The third chapter shows how Médine, Kery James and Youssoupha use leaders' figures to emphasise a *devoir de mémoire* ("memory duty") towards them. Chapter 4 displays the links created by rappers between the leaders and themselves. By doing so, the artists present themselves as heirs of the leaders, proving their struggles are still playing today. Chapter 5 argues that the leaders' figures are also used as cultural references for rappers, showing their multicultural background and their distancing from the French national narrative.

The third part analyses the reception of the historical knowledge and figures conveyed by rappers. Chapter 6 examines how the targeted audience (rap public) reacts to this knowledge, by analysing YouTube comments sections of the songs used in this research. It shows that the reactions are mostly positive, confirming the role of rappers as public historians. Chapter 7 delves into the press reception, both in generalist and specialised press. It shows that the historical-memorial role of rap music is not fully tackled by the generalist press, while specialised websites and blogs are more attentive to this aspect. This suggests an ambivalent role of rap music in societal issues.

Finally, conclusions will be drawn, as well as directions for further research[1].

[1] The word count (excluding quotations and scholarly apparatus) is substantially over the suggested limit. This is due to the extensive close readings and quotations needed to demonstrate my findings. I have discussed this with my supervisor who agreed that the discourse analysis and close reading required extra space.

Conceptual Framework

This research relies on a cultural, memorial, and postcolonial approach to French rap and more specifically to the figures of anti-colonialism mentioned in songs by three artists: Kery James, Médine and Youssoupha. This triple approach is sustained by different concepts and theories outlined below. I chose these three rappers for several reasons. In the first place, they are major figures in French political rap for at least twenty years. Since the beginning of their career, they showed their engagement towards marginalised populations in France. Each of them cumulates several hundreds of millions of views on their YouTube channels, which ensures that their message is shared with a large audience. In the second place, they have a multicultural background (Médine is Franco-Algerian, Kery James was born in Guadeloupe to Haitian parents, and Youssoupha was born in Zaïre/DRC). Their personal biographies are related to the French history of colonisation and immigration. In third place, they are often used as examples in previous work on French rap, which allowed me to have a basis to start with (see for example Béru, 2011; Brodier, 2022; Hammou, 2014; Mowang Ngoula, 2021).

However, as three of many artists, they represent a very small part of the French political rap scene. Therefore, the results of this research cannot be generalised to the whole scene. Moreover, their specific position in French society regarding their background and spatial surroundings (Le Havre for Médine and the Parisian *banlieue* for Kery James and Youssoupha) also suggests caution in generalising from my research results. Finally, I must stress that they are all men. This once again leads to a specific social position, and I want to highlight the large and growing number of women

and gender non-conforming people on the French (and global) rap scene, which academia should also consider[2].

Before discussing the concepts and theories on which this research relies, I first define the main terms of the research such as hip hop, public debate, memory, and postcolonial. The definitions I use for "hip hop" or "rap" come from the recent book *40 ans de musiques hip-hop en France* (2022) edited by Karim Hammou and Marie Sonnette-Manouguian, both authorities in French hip-hop studies for several decades now. "Hip-hop" appears as a globalising term describing cultural practices from different artistic movements. Within "hip-hop culture", one can find music, usually split into DJ and MC roles/practices, choreography (breakdance) or graphic (graffiti, tag) practices (Hammou and Sonnette-Manouguian, 2022, p. 14). Many hip-hop practitioners and scholars add a fifth "pillar" in hip-hop culture – that of knowledge. In the USA, "hip-hop" refers mainly to rap music while in France it is rather used to describe US rap, differentiating it from French rap. It also strongly refers to dancing practices (p. 15). This research focuses on the musical aspect of hip-hop culture, and more specifically on rap music, as it is the most spread practice in France. Moreover, this choice is motivated by my personal preferences.

Rap refers to a more or less innovative vocal practice[3] that developed in the 1970s in New York, influenced by Jamaican and funk music. It is a specific "practice of interpretation, neither spoken nor sung but uttered in harmony with a rhythmic" (Hammou, 2014, p. 9). Rap music is one of the best-known musical genres stemming

[2] For further insights into this scene, see www.madamerap.com.

[3] As indicated by Hammou and Sonnette-Manouguian in the introduction: "However, the rapping vocal technique is a partial innovation in the African American and Caribbean contexts in which *toast*, oral poetry [...] and diverse sorts of talking-singing have a long collective history" (2022, p. 16).

from hip-hop culture, and is the leading genre represented under the umbrella term "urban music" in France (Hammou and Sonnette-Manouguian, 2022).

"Public debate" is a key term in the following analysis. More specifically, I deal with "public debate on French colonial history". This term draws on the concept of the "public sphere" as conceptualised by Habermas in the 1960s. It is "a realm of our social life in which something of a public opinion can be formed" and where "access is guaranteed to all citizens" (Habermas, 1964, p. 49). Freedoms are associated with the public sphere, such as the freedom of assembly or the "freedom to express and publish opinions" (p. 49). I will broaden the concept of Habermas, as he mentions that "state authority [...] is not a part of it [the public sphere]" (p. 49). In this research, the public sphere will include the sphere of citizens, the state, and the press. Indeed, Habermas also underlines the importance of "newspapers and magazines, radio and television" as "the media of the public sphere" (p. 49). To this list, the Internet should also be added, as it encompasses both media and citizens' opinions.

In this thesis, then, the term "public debate" references the discussions and debates about the French colonial past and postcolonial present held in the public sphere where the actors are the citizens, the press, and the state. This can cover a lot of different outputs, such as memorial laws, discussions about the recognition (or not) of the colonial past by the French government, antiracist and anti-colonial activism, or debates in different fields triggered by social events (such as the 2020 BLM movements). My definition of "public debate" includes many features, and simply requires that a discussion with different positions on rap and French empire/colonialism or its legacies is triggered and examined publicly. The risk of such a broad definition is that it can give the research too broad a scope. In the Sources and

Methods section, I explain how I manage this by selecting a limited range of contributions to study the impact of rap music on the debates about (post)colonial issues in the French public realm.

This research is positioned in a postcolonial framework stemming from postcolonial studies, which questions the production of knowledge, the sources, and the historical evidence, that before postcolonial critique were conventional in European historical scholarship (Gunn, 2014). Postcolonial theory questions what had been deemed universal, *id est* European thought, and codified as a disciplinary set of standards for European historians in the nineteenth century. Postcolonialism refers to a historical period after the dissolution of empires (after the 1970s) which also saw immigration waves from the former colonies and consequently the emergence of a new ethnic identity. But it does not mean that colonialism and imperialism ended in the 1970s, as their cultural, economic, social, and political legacies are still visible in society. It is these legacies that the postcolonial critique aims at combatting.

Colonialism refers to an economic and informal "domination of a state or people by another", whereas imperialism is defined as a project of domination driven by state policies (Gunn, 2014, p. 158). They are also temporally distinct: the 15th-18th centuries are a time of colonialism, while the 19th and 20th centuries are a period of imperialism. However, they both "imply the domination of one state or people by another", and "the concept of postcolonialism is related to both of these terms" (Gunn, 2014, p. 158). In this research, I will mostly use the term "colonialism" because of its lexical proximity with "post-colonialism", but I could refer to the 15th-18th and/or 19th-20th centuries (the context will always clarify which period I refer to).

Moreover, historians of empire and colonialism, along with scholars of these fields in many disciplines, have shown how colonialism and imperialism are linked (see for example Burbank & Cooper, 2011). Globalisation, the "capitalist international division of labour" as well as the "Western politico-military hegemony" are systems through which colonialism and imperialism are still noticeable (Gunn, 2014, p. 159). Postcolonialism, therefore, designates both a historical period and a critical analysis of identity, race, and place, aiming to decolonise "Europe's intellectual legacy" through interdisciplinarity (p. 160). The main point of this approach is to show the perspective of the (former) colonised, the subaltern (to use Spivak's word; also see Ghose, in ABD Stories, 2020).

As this thesis shows, the specificities of the colonial and postcolonial relations between France and its (former) colonies are crucial to a better understanding of the creation of a dissonant memory culture, which is to say constellations of clashing or contradictory public memories. This framework is essential for this research, as it to unveils the post-colonial relations between the official French memory and the dissonant memory conveyed through rap music.

It is also crucial to consider the French colonial past and the state's current relations with its former colonies. Indeed, most rappers (including the ones studied in this research) denounce both. They also point out the remains of the colonial power relations, still present in their daily lives. In this research specifically, the use of non-White antiracist or anti-colonial figures stems from the diminution (or erasure) of the memory of resistance to colonialism in French former colonies. In addition, it indicates the desire of both artists and audiences to decolonise the historical and memorial production at the level of French institutions.

Therefore, another important concept to frame this research stems from memory studies. More particularly, I look at the tensions between a collective, official memory and a dissonant memory, that tries to get a place in the collective debate. Memory studies came out of the cultural turn of the 1980s and focused at the time on national memory. This national memory is a form of collective memory, which is a term coined by Halbwachs in 1925 that came into use in the 1980s. This decade was marked by the postmodern era, which redefined the relationship between memory and history, considering them as complementary (see Assmann, 2008).

Collective memory relates to identity, as it is used to construct a common past and consequently a common identity. Specifically in the case of the nation-state, collective memory is built by selecting events of the past to legitimise the nation-state and homogenise and unite its population through the identification of common past landmarks (see Smith, 2006; Assmann, 2008). In this research, the collective, official memory is the one conveyed and reproduced by the French national narrative (or canon) about its colonial past. It forms an important part in the construction of the French identity as promoted in schools, for example.

Diverging from this collective memory emerges dissonant memories such as the one that I will study here: the memory of the descendants of colonised people or immigrants from the former colonies. I use the concept of dissonant discourse from an article by van Huis et al. (2019) who state what crucial role "dissonance" plays in questioning the "different uses of memory and heritage in Europe" (p. 8). They quote the work of Kisić, who conceptualised "heritage dissonance" as intrinsic to all heritage rather than just as a discourse diverging from the official or "authorised" (see Smith, 2006) heritage discourse. In this understanding, "dissonant" leaves space to consider

tensions that show in the different discourses at stake, and to open the place for actions. The idea of "dissonant" discourse/memory is here used instead of "counter" as it shows a multiplicity of perspectives. Indeed, I consider that "counter" conveys a too strict dichotomy between the official and non-official discourses/memories.

This dissonant memory finds itself at the crossroads of collective and individual memory, as it is not disseminated by the institutions but rather by activists who ask for a wider recognition of the memory of their ethnic group in French (colonial) history. Besides the memory of a group and its history, they can also express individual memories in a more recent past. Therefore, it can be termed a "bottom-up" memory (see Assmann, 2008), as it investigates subaltern/working-class experiences.

Finally, it is interesting to work within the frame of public history and more precisely memory activism. Public history is rather complicated to define (see Cauvin, 2022). Here, I use this term to show that rappers gather and disseminate historical information to a wide and diverse public – their audience. Moreover, they are not historians or experts themselves, which encompasses another aspect of public history, "history from below" (Samuel, 1994). In that regard, public history is considered bottom-up history, namely history by the people. It entails new ways to study history, such as oral history, using material and visual culture or ego documents. Moreover, it underlines that "History is not the prerogative of the historian. […] It is, rather, a social form of knowledge, the work in a given instance, of a thousand different hands" (Samuel, 1994).

Furthermore, I analyse the postcolonial critique by French rappers as memory activism, which is encompassed by public history. Memory activism defines the relationship between social movements and collective memory. Social movements rely

on and shape collective memories, while also manipulating official memory and creating their own dissonant memory (Berger, Scalmer and Wicke, 2021). Considering the socio-political aspect of rap music and the counter-memory of the French colonial past that it offers, the concept of memory activism can help better understand and define the role of French rappers in the construction of dissonant memories of the colonial past in France. This construction is framed within public history, where rappers are not experts but rather contribute to the building of a wider and more complete French history.

This research also calls for a framework taken from reception studies. Reception studies (or audience studies) stem from media studies and are concerned with the audience of media messages. It is understood that audiences are necessary to make meaning of a message (Hinds Jr., 1996). Audience studies have largely been used in studying popular cultures, such as television (see Steiger, 2005). Livingstone wrote in 1998 that there is no clear canon in reception studies, as it is concerned with many other fields (such as psychology or sociology) and as "criticisms have largely gone unanswered" (p. 2). In a 1996 article, Hinds Jr. proposes "a holistic approach to the study of popular culture" by analysing "context, text, audience and recording" (p. 11). He stresses the importance of audience studies, which have been mostly "ignored" by popular culture researchers.

In her book *Media Reception Studies*, Staiger presents different theories about media reception and effects and defines two major approaches in cultural studies (2005). On the one hand, a structural-functional approach, assuming "power equivalencies among the various members of a larger social organisation". On the other hand, a critical approach, "in which social groups are not assumed to have an ability to counterbalance

each other" and where power is mostly at the hands of certain groups. This research rather relies on the second framework, using critical cultural studies to analyse the reception of rap music. Indeed, as previously mentioned, even though it is a widely spread genre, rap music is still marginalised from music institutions in France and is often demonised by the media, thus contributing to a "bad reputation" (see for example Hammou, 2014). Moreover, many of the major actors in rap music come from marginalised groups (mainly in terms of race or social class). The critical cultural approach thus makes more sense.

About the songs' texts, the chosen approach is that of the text as open and polysemic. This approach draws on De Certeau's concept of "poaching", meaning that the reader makes the meaning they want or need from the text (Hinds Jr., 1996). The texts are seen as polysemic (Hinds Jr., 1996 after Fiske, 1989). One limit is that this approach does not rely on audience practices and behaviours. This research tries to overcome that by defining the boundaries of the reception of rap music in France (with PCF surveys, see Sources and Methods). Moreover, it considers fans behaviours (see Sources and Methods).

Staiger presents different types of fans behaviour within audience studies (2005, after Jenkins, 1992). An important one for this research is "the adoption of 'a distinctive mode of reception'" implying that fans are "purposeful in their consumption" (Staiger, 2005). This has implications for this study as it could confirm that comments sections are more likely to reflect only the opinions of a committed part of the audience that regularly follows the artist's projects. They are also more likely to re-listen to the songs and thus their understanding or opinion of it can change through numerous listenings.

A second relevant aspect is that fans constitute "a particular interpretive community", forming a network where they "discuss, debate, [...] teach perceptions" or explain texts (Staiger, 2005). This is the case of the rap encyclopaedia www.genius.com that is used in this research. Consequently, fans also create knowledge by explaining lyrics, which can in turn trigger discussion. Finally, the importance of context is stressed by different scholars (see Hinds Jr., 1996; Staiger, 2005). Giving historical, and political details on the context in which the song has been written, or maybe even personal details about the artist's life can prove useful in better understanding both the text and the reception of the audience.

Sources and Methods

The time scope of this research extends from 2007 until the present (2023). The year 2007 in France marks the election of Nicolas Sarkozy as President, who has been criticised for his right-wing policies, specifically around immigration and the *banlieues* (Brodier, 2022; Lotem 2021). In addition, he pressed charges in 2002 against one of the members of the rap group La Rumeur for “defamation against the police”. He was then the Ministry of the Interior.

In 2020, the death of George Floyd (a Black man), killed by Derek Chauvin (a White policeman) in Minneapolis, Minnesota, sparked worldwide demonstrations and an antiracist and anti-colonialist movement, mainly with the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. The repercussions of this tragic event are still visible today, as it put antiracist issues at the heart of the public debate and triggered a public discussion on post- and neo-colonialism. This is why the end limit of this research is the present (2023).

This time delineation is also justified by the study of the postcolonial discourse in French rap. For example, Djavadzadeh studied this discourse before and after the 2000s (2015). In addition, both pre-2000s and 2000s rap music have already been widely researched (see for example Béru, 2011; Brodier, 2022; Charvet, 2016; Djavadzadeh, 2015). Moreover, time constraints prevent me from choosing a wider time window.

Sources

The sources for this research are divided into two categories: musical sources and press sources. The musical sources encompass the texts of the songs analysed as well as the reactions to them. I selected these songs from the discography (since 2007) of three French rappers: Kery James, Médine and Youssoupha. These artists are known for their socially committed rap and their critique of French society, specifically on issues of racism and Islamophobia. Moreover, they are popular artists in the rap scene and have long careers. Consequently, they have a wide audience to reach with their music (also see Interlude).

The study of rap music should include not only textual analysis but also musical (and eventually visual) analysis. Indeed, rap is not only held by texts – even though they are crucial, especially in political rap – but also by the instrumental which creates meaning through the selective use of samples, rhythms, musical inspirations, etc. Moreover, video clips or album covers can also reveal the inspirations and political messaging of their creators. However, due to time constraints, this research will only focus on textual analysis. In addition, musical and visual analysis both require skills that are beyond the boundaries of cultural history. My lack of training in these disciplines also justifies the absence of such analysis.

To study the reception of the songs and their impact (or not) on the French public debate, I will use YouTube comments and press sources. Because the term "public debate" or "public sphere" is quite vague (see Conceptual Framework), I limited myself to YouTube comments sections of the corresponding songs, two generalist newspapers, and three online specialized websites (see below).

I selected the YouTube comments section as a source for the reception of the songs because YouTube is one of the major ways to consume music. The fact that it is thought of as a social network, with the possibility to interact (like/dislike button, "follow" function, comments sections), encourage the interaction and the expression of people's opinions. I gave specific attention to how people approach the song beyond the aesthetic or musical aspect, especially regarding the historical or memorial aspect.

I acknowledge that most of the audience is usually not commenting on YouTube, so this sample is quite reduced. As such, it is only representative of the most committed fans (as shown in Staiger, 2005; also see Conceptual Framework). At the same time, it can be an indicator of the reach of the song or the themes tackled in it.

The press sources (specialised and general) are helpful to better understand the motivations and perspectives of the rappers, through interviews. Moreover, they are useful to study the reception of an album or a song. Articles can capture and illustrate debates or discussions triggered by a song or an album, and they provide a journalistic review or critique of the work of the artist. For example, in the 2000s a lot of rap artists were at the heart of the public political debate, mostly because of their stances on police brutality (see for example Charvet, 2016; Hammou, 2014). Examining press coverage shows how these debates were linked to wider societal issues. Press coverage, therefore, helps reveal the contribution of rap artists to the postcolonial debate in France.

I gathered generalist press articles from two major newspapers in France: *Le Monde* and *Libération*. "Generalist press" here refers to newspapers with a daily publication aiming at informing people. They are not specialised in a topic in particular. Moreover, both *Le Monde* and *Libération* are qualified as "general news" by the ACPM. I chose

them because of their weight in the French public press, their links with the rap scene (for example both Youssoupha and Kery James published articles in *Le Monde*), and the efficiency of their online archives. It must be kept in mind that press sources can be biased, as they often reflect political opinions, so this analysis recognises their political leanings.

Le Monde is the most read and diffused generalist newspaper in France (ACPM, 2023a), with a centre-left political line. It has an audience of almost 2,9 million per semester, half of which is from a high middle class (ACPM, 2023b). This audience is also rather leftist, as revealed in a 2012 survey (Ifop, 2012). Over the last year, the website received between 107 and 138 million visits per month (ACPM, 2023c). *Libération* is the seventh most-read newspaper in France (ACPM, 2023), and has a rather liberal leftist editorial line. According to the ACPM, the newspaper has an audience of roughly 1 million per semester (over the last year), half of which is from a high middle class (ACPM, 2023d). The website registers around 20 million visits per month over the last year (ACPM, 2023e).

Specialised press sources included online specialised press and online specialised blogs. I used the website of the Abcdr du Son (www.abcdrduson.com) and Le Rap en France (www.lerapenfrance.fr) because they have a broad scope in their topics. They publish interviews, investigations, and news around the rap world in France and elsewhere. Their diffusion is way less large than the generalist press chosen. Such data are complicated to find, but as they are exclusively online and dedicated to rap audiences (thus younger people), we can rely on their social media data to have an idea of their audience.

The Abcdr du Son has 10k subscribers on YouTube, more than 9000 followers on Instagram, 27,7k on Twitter and 40k on Facebook. It is the most diffused of these specialist sources. It was created in 2000 and claims no economic model, but rather works like a fanzine. In the 2010s, the journalists working for the Abcdr were all volunteers (Fortems, 2013). Le Rap en France has a more confidential audience, with more than 1500 subscribers on YouTube, almost 3000 followers on Instagram, more than 7000 followers on Twitter, and 13k on Facebook. This smaller audience can be explained by the late creation of the website, in 2011. The journalists are also volunteers and identify as “rap aficionados”. Thus, these two webzines have a very modest diffusion compared to the generalist press. Moreover, they are run by and for rap lovers, therefore addressing an audience already listening to rap music. At the same time, it ensures that the journalists have a better comprehension of the codes of rap music.

The online specialised blogs I intended to use are Global France – Empire and its Contemporary Legacies (www.sites.duke.edu/globalfrance) from Duke University, and Sur un Son Rap (www.surunsonrap.hypotheses.org), the blog of Karim Hammou. However, in the end, only Sur un Son Rap had relevant information for my research. Once again it is complicated to evaluate its audience, and no social media can help in that case. However, considering that it is an academic blog and seeing the (very) small number of comments on each post, it can be presumed that it has a very small audience. Moreover, that audience is probably related to academia (as the blog can be found through Hypotheses, which proposes numerous social sciences and humanities academic blogs) or interested in rap music from a sociological perspective.

Finally, I also used some insights from the surveys *Pratiques Culturelles des Français* (PCF – Cultural Practices of French People)[4] that measure every ten years the evolution of the type of culture consumed by French people. These surveys allow us to study the evolution of the position of rap music in the French musical landscape and can be crossed with data about social background or gender (see Hammou and Molinero, 2020). The last one was released in 2018. They provide general consideration about the place of rap music in France, before delving into the focus of that research. However, as I could not access the results of the last study (2018), I drew the analysis on the work of Hammou and Molinero in the chapter "Rap et RnB dans les pratiques culturelles en France" (2022).

Methods and methodology

To properly analyse the sources and answer the main question of this research (*What memories of anti-colonial and antiracist figures do rap artists offer through their songs and to what extent does it contribute to the public debate on French colonial history?*), I used different methods. I drew mainly on cultural-historical methods as seen during the Master's programme and on reception studies methods.

To select the songs to analyse, I reviewed the discography of each artist since 2007. I selected the songs mentioning anti-colonial or antiracist figures. The mention of these figures can be their names, but also less obvious references (in the form of periphrasis for example). I gathered the texts from the "rap encyclopaedia" Genius (www.genius.com). Founded in 2009, Genius is a "media company that is powered by community, our in-house creative team, and the artists themselves". It is a collaborative

[4] see https://www.culture.gouv.fr/Thematiques/Etudes-et-statistiques/L-enquete-pratiques-culturelles

project that aims at explaining lyrics and producing news articles about the music world (see https://genius.com/artists/Genius). I acknowledge that using such a database limits the scope of my research to the songs listed on the website. However, as I aim to focus on songs that had enough success to be a widely distributed dissonant discourse, they are probably featured on these databases.

To analyse the songs' texts, I used close reading and historical discourse analysis as complementary methods (see Strange, 2016). Close reading is a primary look at texts, allowing me to focus on the relations between language, politics, and society. As it primarily stems from literary studies, it makes sense to use it for rap lyrics that are related to poetry (Nachtergael, 2021). In a second place, I conducted historical discourse analysis (HDA) to make sense of the close reading. HDA is a mode of critical discourse analysis (CDA), which examines language as penetrated by power relations (Park, 2015). As such, discourse is "a stake in social struggle as well as a site of social struggle" (Fairclough, 2015, p. 3). As discourse is power-laden, what is said is as important as the silences – what is omitted. These silences are significant in colonial history, as showed by Bijl for the Netherlands (2012). He discussed the "cultural aphasia" around the Dutch colonial past (2012, p. 449) referring to the forgetfulness of or silence about Dutch colonial violence in Indonesia. As "the lack of language inhibits the production of a memorable past" (Bijl, 2012, p. 449), cultural aphasia is directly linked to memory issues. HDA can thus help to reveal the power relations at stake in the construction of the official and dissonant memories of colonialism in France.

Therefore, I conducted a historical analysis of the rappers' postcolonial discourse, to understand in which context the references to antiracist and anti-colonial figures are made. Moreover, this analysis shows how these figures are mentioned by the rappers,

by defining the textual and historical context of their use. Studying the construction of the discourse on antiracist and anti-colonial figures helps to better understand the construction of a dissonant memory by the rappers. Moreover, it shows how rappers contribute to the critique of the invisibility of these figures and leaders in the French canon, thus challenging the silences of the official memory.

Once I selected the songs to analyse, I determined whether the names were "simply" mentioned (as kind of tributes, for example) or if the leaders were more widely evoked (e.g., description of events of their lives). Ideally, I conducted the close reading and subsequent historical discourse analysis on songs that offer a narrative around them (for more matter to analyse). I also considered songs that only briefly mention them, but a deeper analysis was not necessarily conducted if there was too little matter to analyse (to avoid wanting absolutely to find elements that fit my research even though there are none).

Reception or audience studies don't have a clear canon or consensus about their methodology (Livingstone, 1998). It is an interdisciplinary field of study that regroups concepts and methods from many other fields such as psychology or sociology (Steiger, 2005). Because of the vagueness of a clear method for reception studies, I rather defined a set of questions that guided this part of my research. The analysis of audience comments and press articles about the selected artists (or about precise songs) tried to answer the following questions:

- Does the audience feel like it has acquired new knowledge related to postcoloniality after listening to the song? How does it position itself in relation to that (emotional response)?

- Does the audience add knowledge/commentary of their own, thus helping to build the public memory?
- Do they identify their own background/ethnic position and connection to the material?
- How does the audience comment specifically on the figures mentioned in the song?
- Does the song trigger a public discussion? Do commentators consider it a new one? Do they consider that it brings new insights?

This set of questions allows me to complete an analysis of the historical and political context in which the song has been written. Moreover, it focuses on the reception of the postcolonial critique made by the artists and the impact it had on both the rappers' audience and the public debate.

The reception of the historical knowledge conveyed by the rappers (through figures) was studied from different sources (mentioned above). I gathered the YouTube comments by skimming through the comments on the most popular (regarding the number of views) video for each song, to reach the widest possible audience. The only exception was for Youssoupha's songs, as the artist recently put back all his repertoire on YouTube. For this specific case, I also checked the comments section of the second most viewed video. The YouTube research was always in the form of "[name of the song name of the artist]".

I first skimmed through the comments, selecting the ones relevant to the research (i.e., mentioning historical events in relation to the song, historical sources in relation to the song, or mentioning leaders' names). I then analysed the selected comments and classified them alongside the lines drawn by the questions guiding the analyse (see

above). I chose to not use keywords to skim through them because online comments do not always have perfect spelling. I did not want to miss interesting comments because of that, nor introduce a bias based on the level of education in my research. I chose to not anonymise the comments, as they are in the public domain.

Concerning the generalist press sources, I skimmed through the online archives to find articles relevant to my research, thanks to keywords. These keywords were the names of the artists ("Médine", "Youssoupha", "Kery James"), then the names followed by "*rappeur*" ("rapper") or "*rap*" and "*histoire*" ("history"). I used a similar method for specialised press sources. I skimmed through the websites using the names of the artists as keywords.

The following section will delve into the theories used of this research, setting up the context for the analysis.

Part One: Theory and Context

Chapter 1: French rap as a protest genre: The emergence of the postcolonial critique

"On vit extra-muros donc on arrive par vos égouts
Nous sommes des cargaisons d'femmes voilées, des youyous stridents
Des rastas, des casquettes tournées, des voyous prudents
Des espoirs accrochés, des paradis assassinés"

"We live extra-muros so we arrive through your sewers
We are shiploads of veiled women, of strident ululations
Of Rasta men, of reversed caps, of cautious gangsters
Of fragile hopes, of assassinated paradises"

Gaël Faye, "Irruption" (2017)

"Mais putain ! Sais-tu encore aujourd'hui
Madinina[5], l'île aux fleurs est une colonie ?"

"But fuck! Do you know that still today
Madinina, the flowers island, is a colony?"

Casey, "Chez Moi" (2006)

Introduction

Rap music emerged in France during the 1980s and quickly grew as a major music genre. Even though it was not specifically meant to be political, it was developed by many rappers as a protest genre, denouncing the life conditions in the French suburbs (*banlieues*). The spatial association of rap with the *banlieues* developed in parallel to a social and racial characterisation of rap music presented by many media outlets. This led to the association of rap music with violence, and it became a symbol of urban problems in France. Despite this negative connotation, the imagery of the street has

[5] Madinina is one of the local, pre-colonisation names of the island of Martinique. The island is a former French colony, still under French sovereignty first as a *département* (1946-2016) and as a "territorial collectivity" since 2016.

also been a way for labels and artists to sell their music. As the 1980s continued, French rap evolved into different branches, among them conscious or political rap, from which emerged a postcolonial critique. This chapter shows how rap music developed as protest music in France and examines the origins of its postcolonial critique. To do so, this chapter presents a short history of the development of rap in France. It then reveals the mechanisms of how rap becomes associated with the *banlieues* and with violence, as that linkage is also the basis of the postcolonial critique. Finally, it will shed light on this specific critique and show how rappers use it to voice a dissonant discourse and put into question the French collective history and identity.

1. The ambivalent "success story" of French rap

Rap is originally an African American music genre[6] that emerged in the 1970s as part of hip-hop culture, alongside breakdance, graffiti or sound systems[7]. In 1979, the Sugarhill Gang released the first rap song to achieve commercial success: the single *Rapper's Delight*. Distributed in France by Vogue, it also achieved success there and popularised rap (in English). The first French rap success arrived a few years later in 1982, with the song "Chacun fait (c'qui lui plaît)" by Chagrin d'amour. It became a model of how to do rap music in French (Hammou, 2014).

In 1980s France, the distinction between "Black" and "white" music was still present, and this "*ligne de partage des couleurs*" influenced how music was seen (Hammou, 2014.). Thus, rap music was quickly linked to Blackness and Black culture. Consequently, it triggered social mechanisms linked to racism, such as specific imagery

[6] But it also has Caribbean and Latinx influences, which were also part of the cultural diaspora in New York City.
[7] Sound systems are originally created by driving around speakers blasting music. It could also be fixed, for example during block parties where hip-hop lovers gathered to make music, dance, and rap. The mixing desk is an improvement of the first sound systems (Frit, 2016).

or an alterity that cannot be surpassed (Hammou and Sonnette-Manouguian, 2022). Despite that, rap music took root in France, as shows the organisation of the 1982 New York City Rap Tour, sponsored by Fnac and Europe 1.

A major turning point in the spread of rap music in France was the end of the state monopoly on the radio in 1982 (see Hammou, 2014; Raska, 2022). Free radios emerged, notably Carbone 14, animated by Phil Barney and diffusing "Black" music and funk, and Radio 7 with the show *Rapper Dapper Snapper*, dedicated to rap music (Raska, 2022). In 1984, TF1 (one of the three major TV channels of the time) proposed the show *H.I.P.H.O.P.*, animated by Patrick Duteil (aka Sidney). Sidney was previously animating *Rapper Dapper Snapper* and was the first Black host on French television. *H.I.P.H.O.P.* was dedicated to rap music and Sidney received famous guests such as the Sugarhill Gang or Afrika Bambaataa (see *Figure 1*). Despite its success, the show was put to an end in December of the same year, which contributed to the image of rap music as a passing fad (Raska, 2022). 1984 also saw the first rap album, *Paname City Rappin* by Dee Nasty (who would go on to host the show *Deenastyle* on Radio Nova from 1988), a project produced in total independence and inspired by US rap music. All these shows and events demonstrate the success of rap music in France from the mid-1980s, confirmed by the emergence of big names of French rap at the end of the decade (such as Les Sages Poètes de la Rue in 1987, or NTM and Ministère A.M.E.R. in 1988).

The visibility of French rap continued to grow in the 1990s, with new forms. For example, the year 1990 marked the comeback of rap music on television, with M6's *Rapline*, proposed by Olivier Cachin. *Rapline* notably produced video clips for rappers and put forward non-Parisian rap such as the group IAM (from Marseilles). Video clips are nowadays mainstream in the music industry, which was less the case back then. *Rapline* offered professional production of video clips, thus contributing to the legitimation of rap music as a professional activity (see Hammou, 2014).

Afrika Bambaataa: the social role of rap

A former member of the Black Spades, an antiracist gang from the Bronx, Kevin Donovan adopted the alias Afrika Bambaataa as reference to a Zulu chief who fought the British colonisation in South Africa in 1906. In 1977, he founded the Universal Zulu Nation to offer young Black people an alternative to gang violence. He is associated with the slogan "Peace, love, unity and having fun" which is considered by some rappers as a manifesto of the values the Zulu Nation (and with it, hip-hop culture) should promote.

He contributed to the emergence of the social and political dimension of hip-hop culture and rap music. The historical figures of Black resistance to oppression (independences of African countries, Pan-Africanism, or African American struggles) are an important role model in that regard.

The Zulu Nation promotes an idea of social responsibility of rappers and the social utility of rap music through meaningful texts.

Figure 1. Afrika Bambaataa: pioneer of the social role of rap music.
after Charvet, 2016

French rap also beneficiated from the 1994 Carignon law forcing commercial radios to broadcast at least 40% of "music created or interpreted by French or francophone artists or authors", and at least half of it from new artists or productions (Hammou, 2014, p. 158). This law answered a political and economic concern, as the sales of francophone songs had been diminishing for a decade (Hammou, 2014). Commercial

radios (mainly NRJ, Skyrock and FunRadio) were specifically critiqued because their programming, targeting young people, gave too much space to Anglo-Saxon music.

To keep their young audience and comply with the Carignon law, DJs and stations turned towards French rap, mainly selected by majors and with a focus on "transformat rap"[8] (Hammou, 2014, p. 159). Among these radios, Skyrock came forward as "First on rap music" and gave space to rappers. They were invited for interviews or freestyles in the show *Planète Rap* from 1998. They could also host other shows to share their expertise on rap music, broadcast their songs, and the songs they eventually produced with their label or that they liked (Hammou, 2014). This contributed to the widening of the network of rap music in France.

However, even though radios gave such a space to rappers, it should be noted that they limited themselves to non-political rap and did not air political or hardcore rap music. Thus, even though French rap could reach a wider audience through these radios and spread more effectively their own productions or their friends' ones, it was a space limited to soft and non-political rap music. For example, the title "Je danse le MIA" (1993) by IAM was an absolute hit on the radio, but their political songs – which constitute a large part of their repertoire – did not benefit from such visibility.

The major development in French rap's visibility came with the 1990 release of *Rapattitude*, the first compilation of French rap (see *Figure 2*). *Rapattitude* comprised ten titles by artists such as Dee Nasty, Assassin and Supreme NTM (both known for their harsh criticism of French society). The compilation cover represents Solo, a

[8] The term "transformat rap" designates a rap song with a sung part (most of the time, the chorus). The diffusion of this kind of rap music on radio from the mid-90s allows to "keep rapping while overcoming the aversion of radio programmers for this music genre" (Hammou, 2014, p. 159).

member of the group Assassin, and the title font is inspired by graffiti style. This shows the link between graffiti/tag and rap music, two aspects of hip-hop culture. Its large success contributed to the visibility of rap music in France.

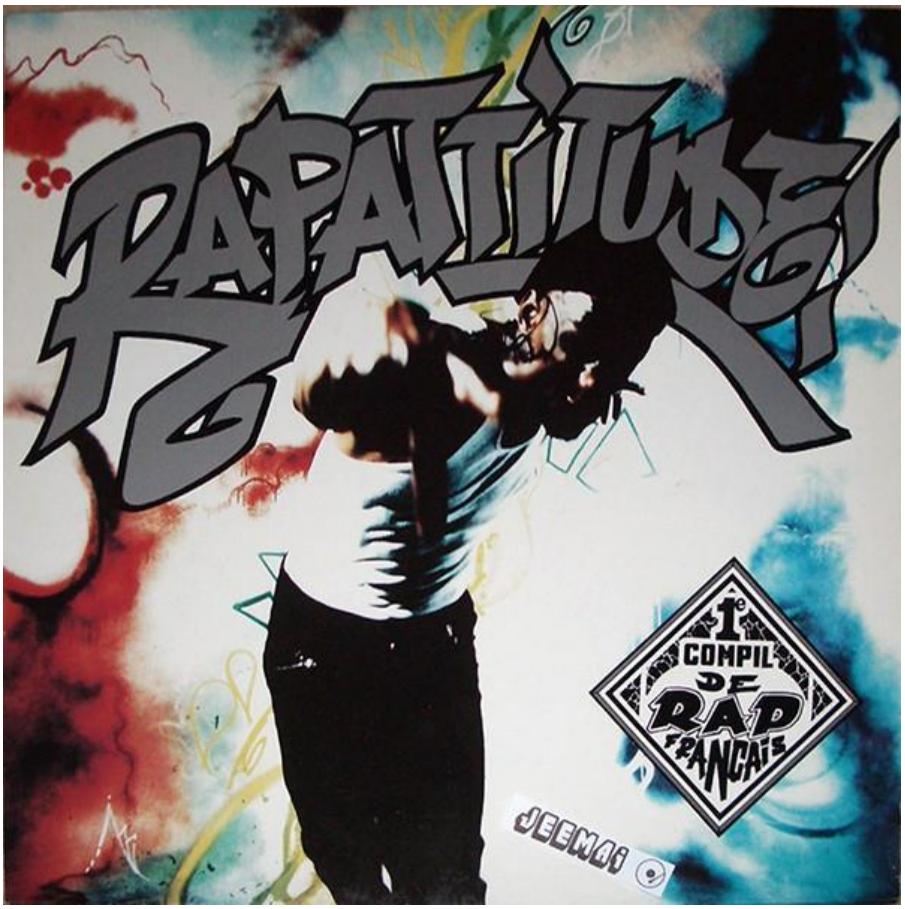


Figure 2. Cover of Rapattitude *(1990). The rapper Solo (from the group Assassin) is looking at the viewer. He is in motion and his right arm is stretched out in front of him. His right fist is clenched, except for his index finger, stretched towards the ground, and his thumb, horizontal. This position refers to the numerous hand movements that rappers make during rap battles or while rapping. The sticker at the bottom-right corner says: "1st compilation of French rap" showing that it was a pioneering project which relied on its uniqueness to achieve commercial success.*

source: discogs.com

This sudden burst in visibility started the "golden age" of French rap. In parallel, it had an important impact on the reception of rap music in mainstream media. Indeed, it is in the 1990s that they started to massively associate rap music and *banlieues*' social problems. This is significant in French rap's history because it contributed to discard rappers' voices and the issues they denounced (see 2.).

Despite mass media linking rap to social problems and despite some rappers harshly criticising French society and state, the 1990s also saw several artists being certified. This is notably the case of NTM for their album *Paris sous les* bombes which received a Golden certification in a few months (SNEP[9]). This shows the ambiguous place of rap music in 1990s France. While the public was enjoying and supporting it (a golden certification indicated between 250 000 and 500 000 sales in 1995), the media were demeaning towards rap music. This ambiguous position is still visible today.

Indeed, French rap is widely popular (Hammou and Molinero, 2022; also see Part Three) but barely acknowledged by musical institutions. This can be seen in the recurring criticism addressed by rappers to the *Victoires de la Musique*, the major music awards ceremony in France (see below), the show mentioned at the outset of this thesis. Numerous rappers denounced this situation, such as Kery James who said in "Mouhammad Alix" (2016):

> "*20 ans de carrière je n'ai jamais reçu de Victoires de la Musique*"
>
> "20 years of career I never received any *Victoires de la Musique*"

Youssoupha also denounced it in "Alléluia" (2018), claiming:

> "*Trop re-noir pour leurs Victoires de la Musique de merde*"
>
> "Too Black for their shitty *Victoires de la Musique*/their *Victoires* of shitty music"

The rapper here makes a link between his skin colour and the fact he never received any prize at this ceremony. In doing so, he also points out racism in the music industry (and to a larger extent in French society). According to him, racism would explain the marginalisation of rap artists in the *Victoires de la Musique*. This aligns with the

[9] see http://snepmusique.com/les-certifications/?annee=1995&interprete=NTM

remarks made by Matunga who denounced the French music industry as racist (see Introduction).

The growing marginalisation of rap artists in the ceremony is shown by the categorisation of rap artists in the *Victoires de la* Musique. They were first considered in similar categories as other artists (e.g., "artist of the year") but were progressively put into a separate category, that of "urban music" (Metzger and Margot, 2020, August 8th). Moreover, rappers are more and more found in the "most streamed" category, as they rely (way more than other musical artists) on digital support (Metzger and Margot, 2020, August 8th). This contributes to the consideration of rap artists as being on the margin of the French musical landscape and shows the timid recognition the mainstream industry gives to them.

By the end of the 1990s, French rap was "a professionalised and racialised segment at the heart of the French music industry" (Hammou and Sonnette-Manouguian, 2022, p. 32). The major labels controlling the industry relied on a "*marketing de la marge*", targeting non-White minorities and exploiting the "imagery of the streets" to sell French rap (Hammou, 2014). Indeed, even though all rappers are not from the streets of the *banlieues*, this imagery was attached to the whole genre by the media in the 1990s. This both serves and undermines the perceived value of rap music, as it was originally showing the realities of the *banlieues* in all their violence, with a strong political message. But the media constructed a figure of the rapper as himself violent, without considering the violence they suffered from in the first place. In doing so, they depoliticised rap music and its message.

2. Rap and the *banlieues:* a media construction?

In France, the *banlieue* is more than a geographical space as the term drags with it "two centuries of diverse appropriations and uses" (Hammou, 2014, p. 85). Kamecka insists on the "dynamic evolution" of the *banlieue*, stressing its "more social than spatial" distance from the city centre (2017, p. 165)[10].

From the 1990s, the generalist press and television contributed to the association of rap and the *banlieues* as they systematically linked the two. This association increased specifically with the emergence of hardcore rap. By denouncing the socio-economic exploitation of people at the margins of French society, it shed light on the life in the *banlieues* marked by poverty, police brutality or racism (Hammou, 2014; Prévos, 2002). Thus, rap music appears as closely tied to the *banlieue* and its social problems. But the media construction of rap as a product of the *banlieues* is damaging in that it depoliticises the rappers' discourse to emphasise perceived violence (Ghose in ABD Stories, 2020; Clément, 2015).

Moreover, the media characterised rappers as spokespeople from the *banlieues*, embodying spaces of contestation opposed to the French state (Hammou, 2014). In addition, this association complexified racist mechanisms, notably of alterity (Hammou and Sonnette-Manouguian, 2022). This alterity is built in terms of age, social class, geographical imagery, and race. Rap is mediatised as music for young, poor, immigrated people from the *banlieues* and consequently embodies the imagery of the "*jeune de banlieue*", implicitly from North Africa (Hammou and Sonnette-Manouguian,

[10] For more insights into the (fascinating) topic of music and (social) geography, see the issue 6 (1-2) of the journal *Volume! La Revue des musiques populaires*, directed by Raibaud and titled Géographie, musique et postcolonialisme (Geography, music and postcolonialsm) (2008)

2022; Helenon, 2006; Ghose in ABD Stories, 2020). Consequently, the alterity of rap music is also built (specifically by generalist TV emissions) as an urban alterity: rap is a phenomenon of the *banlieue* or of big cities where there is a large population of immigrants, such as Marseilles (Hammou, 2014, p. 80). This discourse dragged rap away from music and associated it inextricably with the urban environment in which most rappers evolve, with the social problems associated with it.

During the 1970s, several public policies focused on the *banlieues* where there were a lot of economic and social problems (Kamecka, 2021). In connection to these "*politiques de la ville*", rap music was used by politicians as a way to control youngsters of the popular classes (Hammou, 2014). Young rappers benefited from financial help (for example to rent recording studios), exhibitions about graffiti and tag were held, and the Minister of Culture Jack Lang offered official recognition and support to rap music in 1990[11]. These actions were also inscribed in a political will (since the re-election of Mitterand in 1988) to focus on the deprived neighbourhoods benefitting from the *politiques de la ville* and consequently reinforced the anchoring of hip-hop practices and rap music in these neighbourhoods (Hammou, 2014).

However, due to the failure of politicians to implement effective *politiques de la ville*, *banlieues* grew as sites of separation and exclusion, which many rappers denounce (Kamecka, 2021; Preitschopf, 2021). At the same time, the relationship of rappers with their geographical environment is primordial. It creates a "shared condition" and a

[11] K. Hammou however nuances this recognition: "However, if the recognition granted by Jack Lang legitimises the public support to rap music, its form paradoxically discredits his own Ministry's intervention. [...] Playing on the ambiguity of the term "culture", [...] the Minister's intervention weakens rap's pretension to be an artistic form with universal appeal." (2014, p. 125)

sense of belonging where their identity is created as a "negative of French values", putting into question the French integration model (Kamecka, 2021).

Moreover, some rappers denounce the situation on the *banlieues* as inherited from the colonial past (Sonnette, 2018; see Chapter 2; see Part Two). These denunciations are aligned with the long – if original – tradition of rap as protest music. For some rappers, such as Kery James, rap music is inherently political and dissenting (Metzger and Margot, 2020, August 1st). Similarly, Ärsenik claimed in 1998 "*Qui prétend faire du rap sans prendre position ?*" ("Who pretends doing rap without taking a stand ?"). This quote is largely re-used by rappers, such as Assassin, Kery James or Youssoupha. Thus, rappers mix the social role of rap preached by Afrika Bambaataa and the denunciation of their life in the *banlieues*. Throughout these years a significant element of rap became a postcolonial critique that denounced politics in the *banlieues* as inherited from the colonial past, or that worked by claiming an identity as descendants of former colonised people.

3. The social role of rap music and its postcolonial critique

The idea that rap can have a social role is one of the founding values of Afrika Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation, which influenced many rap artists. However, some scholars suggest that rap music was originally distinguished by its aesthetic and musical components (Diallo, 2009)[12]. According to Diallo, rap music was originally "exclusively a festive practice for Black people in poor neighbourhoods" and did not have this protest dimension, as it was more a means to forget about racial domination

[12] Rap is made by a duo formed by the DJ (disc jockey), making the music (the beat), and the MC (mic controller), reciting his texts in rhythm with the DJ's beats. The MC "differs from traditional singers because of his scansion, the rhetorical processes he adopts, and the language he uses" (Diallo, 2009, p. 3).

(2009, p. 4). This is a controversial stance, as the sounds used for rap originated from the Black, Caribbean and Latinx diaspora in the USA (see 1.). The fact that people from the diaspora used these sounds to create a new form of musical culture can already be considered a form of (cultural) resistance. Indeed, it suggests a will from people to stay close to their roots in a society that does not welcome them or their culture (as shown for example in the case of the *biguine* by Gillett, 2021, chapter 4).

Rap music in France evolved as an "oral and visual artistic expression of the struggle and resistance of the immigrant youth of France'' (Hassa, 2010, quoted in Preitschopf, 2021, p. 19). Hammou sees two dynamics in the politicisation of rap in France: on the one hand, people from the *banlieues* appropriate this music to express "the concrete effects of poverty in popular neighbourhoods", and on the other hand media interpret rap as "systematically politicised" (in Clément, 2015, p. 27). This suggests that in France, rap music was politicised from the beginning. Indeed, many 1990s rap songs had a politically engaged perspective (see for example Charvet, 2016; Clément, 2015; Hammou, 2014). For a lot of rappers, rap should be political, and Kery James for example, denounces that it is not always the case anymore.

At the same time, rap is seen as a "harmless popular leisure" and media or politicians do not take its political dimension seriously (Clément, 2015). Media uses it to emphasise the perceived violence from the banlieues (see 2.). Politicians rather try to silence rappers who seem too enthusiastic in their critique, notably against the police. Indeed, several rappers were brought to justice, such as La Rumeur (2002-2010) and Sniper (2002). In the 2000s, rappers became for the French right-wing (and the far-right) politicians an "enemy from the inside", with the stereotypical traits of a young man from the *banlieue*, that is to say, a young man, often dark-skinned, presumed

Muslim, and with an immigration background (Hammou, 2014). Rap was used as a political tool against this population, arguably diffusing "anti-white racism" (Djavadzadeh, 2015; Hammou, 2014). This was reinforced by the 2005 riots in the Parisian *banlieues*. This image is still not fully gone today.

This discussion has introduced some of the complexities of the consideration of rap in France. For this research, I argue that rap music is originally political. However, its large diffusion in the last two decades inevitably led to other forms of rap. In France, several types of raps emerged, and Béru identifies "three major tendances [...]: "egotrip" rap, "street" rap and "*rap de fils d'immigrés*"" (RFI) (2011, p. 67). The expression refers to rap "dealing with dominations suffered by French people of African descent, with a historical perspective going back to slavery and colonisation but without calling to [...] political commitment" (Clément, 2015, p. 125). It is produced most of the time by artists in a subaltern condition, who are usually excluded from the political and public spheres due to their origin (Clément, 2015; Sonnette, 2018; Béru, 2011). It is also characterised by the rejection of the music industry and the critique of other rappers. Clément places it in the lineage of French protest music while underlining the uniqueness of rap, produced without professional musicians and in a do-it-yourself (DIY) spirit (2015). Several scholars consider that RFI is a postcolonial musical product (Clément, 2015; Béru, 2011).

The major themes of RFI are French colonial history, migration, racism, and poverty (Béru, 2011; Sonnette, 2018). With these themes, the artists offer a critique of the social situation in the *banlieues* and, most importantly, they denounce what they perceive as the continuation of the former coloniser-colonised power relations in French society (Béru, 2011; Sonnette, 2018). This marks a difference with 1990s rap that was

denouncing the French colonial past: postcolonial rap puts forwards the "continuum between the colonial past and the current *colonialité* [13] of the French state" (Djavadzadeh, 2015). Moreover, some artists link former and current colonised people: for example, in Sonnette's study, several artists see the Israeli occupation of Palestine as a neo-colonial situation, in which they position themselves in favour of the Palestinians (2018; also see Béru, 2011; Preitschopf, 2021). RFI, as a postcolonial musical product, claims "a cultural identity shared around the memory of slavery, of colonisation, of immigration, and the linkage between these three memories" (Djavadzadeh, 2015).

This articulation poses the basis of the postcolonial critique in French rap. The 2000s marked the emergence and repression of the postcolonial turn in French rap (Djavadzadeh, 2015). If the 1990s rap was already tackling the social problems of the *banlieues*, the specificity of the 2000s rap is dual. On the one hand, the artists express their critique in terms "so far absent from the public debate" (Djavadzadeh, 2015). On the other hand, the accusations of "violence" towards 1990s hardcore rap turned into accusations of "anti-France" violence or "anti-White racism" towards 2000s postcolonial rap (Djavadzadeh, 2015). Of course, the emergence of RFI around the same time reinforced these accusations as the critique of the subaltern, the former colonised, took space in the public debate.

The 2000s were favourable for the development of such critique, for three major reasons. (1) it corresponds to the time where French rap could adapt to the French

[13] The term "*colonialité*", coined by the sociologist Quijano, refers to the "mismatch between formal affirmations of equality inscribed in law and systemic discrimination on the basis of race or ethnicity." Moreover, "the colonial matrix of power has the effect of producing different levels of citizenship according to the sharing of racial borders." (in Djavadzadeh, 2015).

context, shifting away from its US origins, (2) the media construction of rap as an expression of the *banlieues* and a politicised musical product granted a new status to rap, which was now political, and (3) the 2000s were simply more favourable to the rise of a postcolonial critique, with the emergence of the term itself (Djavadzadeh, 2015). 2005 in particular appears as a key year with the appeal trial of Hamé from the group La Rumeur based on "defamation, attack on the honour and consideration of the national police" intended by the then Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy[14] (Binet, 2010; Pecqueux, 2009). In addition, this year was marked by the 2005 law stressing the "positive role of the French presence overseas, especially in North Africa" (and the ensuing debates) as well as urban riots in several French *banlieues* (see Chapter 2).

This postcolonial critique emerging in the 2000s in French rap is described by Djavadzadeh (2015) as "dissonant voices" that the political power is trying to silence (for example with trials). Indeed, besides the continuum made by artists between the colonial situation and the situation in the *banlieues*, rappers criticse the way history is taught in the schools of the Republic. As several scholars pointed out, most postcolonial rap songs include a critical perspective on schools and school *curricula*. In his analysis of *rap de fils d'immigrés*, Clément identifies six figures representing postcolonial domination: "France, Françafrique, the police, justice, the media and school" (2015, p. 132). These last two, specifically, are accused of legitimising the domination of non-White people. School is criticised for not making efforts to properly teach colonial history by teaching history from the winner's perspective (Kamecka, 2021;

[14] The trial was initially intended by Sarkozy in 2002. The rapper from La Rumeur was released. In 2005, the Ministry of the Interior and the Republic Attorney appealed this decision. The rapper was once again released in 2006. His detractors then decided to appeal to the Cour de Cassation, the highest jurisdiction in French law. This latter cancelled the released of the rapper, putting him back on trial. He won this trial once again, but the Ministry appealed to the Cour de Cassation again (2008). The rapper was definitely released when the Cour de Cassation cancelled this second appeal (2010). This eight-years long trial shows the judicial harassment against rap music in the 2000s.

Preitschopf, 2021). For example, Youssoupha claims in "Apprentissage (remix)" (2011):

> *"Je n'ai rien appris de l'Education Nationale*
> *De leur morale rétrograde et de leurs valeurs coloniales"*
>
> "I learnt nothing from the National Education
> From their retrograde morals and their colonial values"

Consequently, the objective of rappers is the retelling, or revision, of history as taught in French schools by insisting on forgotten historical events (Béru, 2011; Kamecka, 2021; Preitschopf, 2021). In doing so, they offer "a counter-narrative" to redefine "France's collective identity" (Preitschopf, 2021, p. 20) as they do not feel represented in the current one (Kamecka, 2021). Moreover, rappers often use references to the *banlieues* culture or African cultures and to resistance figures that they take from outside of France (Béru, 2011; Helenon, 2006). By invoking these figures and the historical and symbolic references they embody (political, cultural and/or social resistance to colonialism), rappers play the role of "guardians of the collective memory" and of a "difficult past" (Kamecka, 2021, p. 172). Therefore, they put into question French identity through the criticism of its collective memory, pointing out a dissonant memory of the French colonial past.

Conclusion

This chapter showed that French rap, at first inspired by US rap, evolved into a portrait of French society. Due to the spatial origin of most rappers, the social critique focused on the living conditions in the *banlieues*, territories often perceived by their inhabitants as abandoned by public policies. The historical recap of the trajectories of French rap shows how it progressively came forward in the media landscape, first on the radio and then on TV. This visibility participated in its association with the social problems of the

banlieues, making it a genre associated with violence and social disorder (alongside other elements of the hip-hop culture, such as tag; see Hammou, 2014). After the hardcore rap of the 1990s, the 2000s saw the emergence of a postcolonial critique in French rap, which denounced the direct link rappers perceived between the former colonial situation and their current situation in the *banlieues*. Postcolonial rappers consequently see themselves as re-tellers of French history, emphasising the role of indigenous populations in their liberation, or the exactions of France in their former colonies. As such, they create a dissonant discourse and question the French collective memory and identity.

Chapter 2: The *roman* national: Lasting inability to address the postcolonial critique

Introduction

In France, collective memory is defined by the "*roman national*" (national narrative), which constitutes the basis of French official memory, history, and identity. This expression was first coined by Pierre Nora in his work *Les Lieux de mémoire*, which aimed to draw the history of how France commemorates its past (Champier, 2020). The French *roman national* is "a patriotic, centralising narrative, built by historians in the 19th century to uphold the construction of the nation" (Offenstadt, 2009). Consequently, claiming another memory or history than the dominant one spread through public media, politicians and school programmes is seen as a threat to Republican universality and national unity (Bancel, Blanchard and Lemaire**,** 2006; Bancel and Blanchard, 2006).

This framework helps to understand why France has such trouble confronting (mostly) its colonial past, and why reclaiming a diverging history and memory of colonisation is the subject of public controversy and state pushback (see Bertrand, 2006; Blanchard, Bancel and Lemaire, 2006; Hannoum, 2019; Ledoux, 2013). Thus, this difficulty in addressing the colonial past comes both from France as a nation (sustained by its narrative) and as a collective (where different memories clash).

This chapter shows how that national narrative developed, and briefly describes the power it still has in France. The national narrative is deeply anchored in French society and linked to sensitive topics such as French identity, which explains the state's and society's difficulty to discuss it. Thus, questioning it creates complex and controversial

discussions on the French colonial past. These discussions are even more controversial when voiced by the subaltern, as is the case with memory activism from the 1960s. Moreover, the recovery of antiracist movements in the 2020s shows that the French state has still not decided to give up on its national narrative and is even more attached to it. As the *roman national* is sustained by patriotic "heroes" (see 1.), this chapter is also crucial in understanding why rappers put forward non-French figures of anti-colonial and antiracist struggles (see Part Two).

1. A republican national narrative anchored in the colonial past

The *roman national* mostly developed under the Third Republic (1870-1940), which needed to legitimise itself after numerous regime changes during the previous century (see *Figure 3*) and after the defeat against Prussia during the 1870-1871 war. History and its teachings have been a crucial tool to this aim, allowing to unite the French people by offering them a common past and shared history, and consequently a national identity (Champier, 2020; Lemaire, 2006; Besson in Champier & Ramires, 2022, May 12th). This created an "imagined community" (see Anderson, 1983) of the

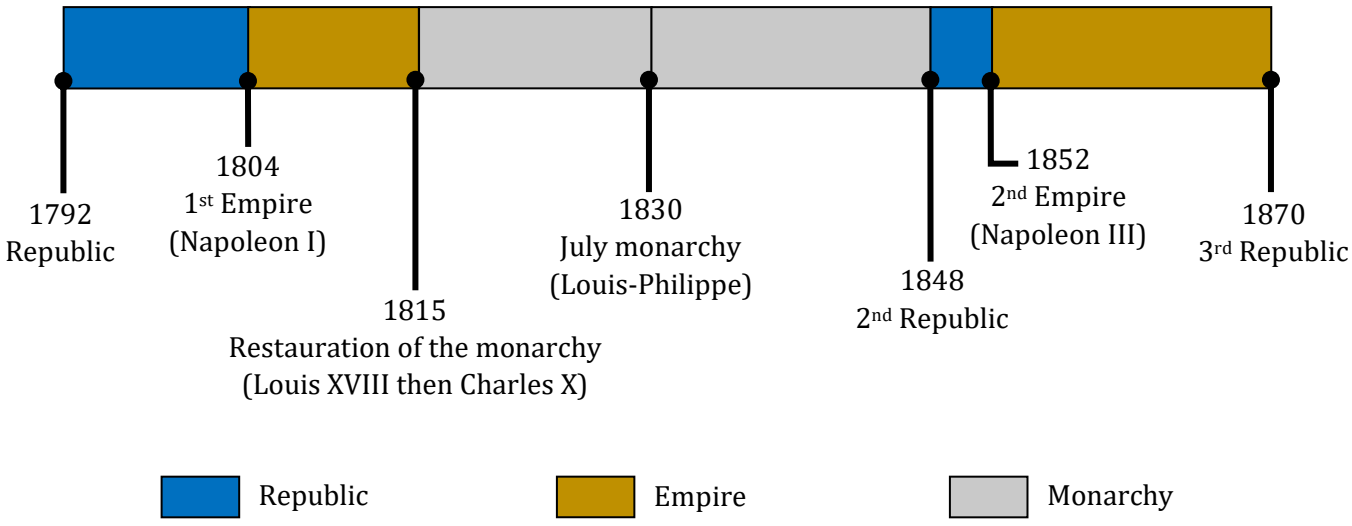


Figure 3. Visual chronology of France's political regimes during the 19th century (from 1792 until 1870).
by the author, 2023

French people as homogenous and sharing a common historical imagery (Champier, 2020).

This historical imagery notably included glorious and common ancestors. In the 19th century, the common way to teach the history of the nation was through great figures that were considered to have contributed to the French *grandeur* (Champier, 2020; Lemaire, 2006; Ledoux, 2013). Consequently, what did not fit in was put aside, and specifically the colonial project (Chabal, 2011). The "forgetting" of Toussaint Louverture, a hero of the liberation of enslaved people in Haiti and of its Independence (on the 1st of January 1804) exemplifies it. By defeating Napoleon I, Toussaint Louverture went against the emperor's narrative as an undefeated chief of state. This image was important for Napoleon early in his reign, so the history of Haiti's independence was discarded. As Napoleon came to be remembered as a "great man" in the French national narrative, Louverture was largely eclipsed from it (see Régent in Champier & Ramires, 2022, February 3rd; Dorigny, 2006).

The idea of *grandeur* coupled with historical figures can still be found today on the frontispiece of the Panthéon which claims: "*Aux grands hommes, la patrie reconnaissante*". This monumental building located in the heart of Paris is a mausoleum for people (mostly White men) considered heroes of the nation. They are thought to concretise French values, ideals, and aspirations, created by and for the nation. They are a human form of the French nation and its grandeur. Moreover, the decision on who will enter the Panthéon is highly political, as it comes from the French President. Through its glorious past and figures, the Republic imposed itself as a legitimate and more importantly as the bearer of values that were deemed superior to those of other countries (Bancel & Blanchard, 2006).

These values of progress, equality and *grandeur* of the nation were used as justification for the colonial project during the Third Republic. France saw itself as superior, and consequently as legitimate to spread its model (Bancel & Blanchard, 2006): it had a "civilising mission". This idea is not so different from other colonialisms. One of the French particularities in this modern colonisation[15] was that the values of freedom and equality were seen as applicable for the colonised people, but when they would be deemed "civilised" (Bancel & Blanchard, 2006; Conklin, 2013). France was then seeing itself as helping the colonised population to access civilisation and "free" themselves. After the First World War, the French colonial empire is considered a space where France achieved the Republican ideal, in opposition to the Old Regime's colonial empire which relied on slavery and to the British colonial empire (Bancel & Blanchard, 2006).

However, discriminations regarding French values were part of the colonial project. The Republic itself was a major actor in this project. The French government of the Third Republic claimed that some "races" were "inferior" and could not achieve freedom, as they were destined to be governed by "superior races" (Bancel & Blanchard, 2006; Chapman & Frader, 2004; Joseph-Gabriel, 2019). Jules Ferry, nowadays part of the *roman national* and celebrated for his contribution to the school of the Republic, claimed the inequality of races in the early stages of modern colonisation, which justified discrimination in the face of the Republican values. This is linked to another French particularism in modern colonisation: local legal systems. With the *Code de l'Indigénat*, France gave a legal frame to its colonies, which created

[15] Scholars usually identify two different phases of French colonisation: one relying on slavery and plantation economy, going from the 16th to the 18th century, and a second one (or "modern" one), relying on territorial occupation and a "civilising mission", during the 19th and 20th centuries (Saada, in Champier & Ramires, 2023).

long-lasting archetypes in the cultural image of the *indigène*, a "man/non-man and citizen/non-citizen" (Bancel & Blanchard, 2006; Chapman & Frader, 2004).

Thus, the French *roman national* was built to design a specific idea of France as a timeless and glorious republican nation upheld by great men. The shared values that defined French identity were also expanded to the colonial empire which was seen as an extension of the national space. The belief in race inequalities and a civilising mission allowed discrimination to fit in the republican ideal and placed colonised subjects and citizens in a position of radical alterity. This process has a long legacy and affects France to this day, in the form of a "*fracture coloniale*".

2. A French "*fracture coloniale*"

"J'suis pas issu d'l'immigration, moi, j'suis issu d'la colonisation"

"I don't have an immigrant background, I have a colonial background"

Youssoupha, "Black Out" (2015)

Despite waves of decolonisation in the mid-20th century and the official end of the French colonial empire with the Independence of Algeria on the 5th of July 1962, France still has difficulty reflecting critically on its colonial history (Bancel, Blanchard and Lemaire, 2006; Hannoum, 2019; Lotem, 2021; Mbembe, 2006; Vann, 2019). In their 2006 collective book, Bancel, Blanchard and Lemaire consequently define a "*fracture coloniale*" in French history, memory, and identity. According to them, this fracture comes from "the persistence and application of colonial schemes to some categories of people (real or constructed) mainly those from the former Empire" (2006). This fracture manifests itself in diverse forms and fields, which makes it very complex. Here, I will focus on the identity and memory aspects of this fracture. Indeed, they allow

conceptualising the memorial revendications of marginalised groups, which often found themselves at the intersection of French and colonial history.

Different waves of immigration happened during the 20th century, which ultimately questioned French identity and citizenship. After the Second World War, France needed a workforce to rebuild the country. To do so, it massively welcomed people from its (former) colonies (Germain, 2016). During the 1960s, the Independence of Algeria led to the repatriation of French Algerians. In the same period, the Bumidom ("*Bureau pour le développement des migrations dans les départements d'outre-mer*" – Bureau for the development of migrations in overseas territories) helped the migrations from the overseas *départements* (which status had changed in 1946 when they became *départements* instead of colonies) towards hexagonal France (Vergès, 2006).

Even though they were legally full French citizens, they faced discrimination regarding employment or housing as non-French immigrants did (Vergès, 2006). Moreover, these discriminations were long-lasting, as Hannoum observed: "In postcolonial France, [the children of *indigènes*] can only be considered immigrants even three to four generations later" (2019, p. 388). Thus, similarly to the colonial *indigène*, postcolonial minorities in France as not seen as full citizens (Lotem, 2016). In that regard, the postcolonial migrations to France questioned the ability of the nation to "realise its promise of human rights and abstract citizenship" (Löytömäki, 2013, p. 207). This postcolonial reading of the failures of French citizenship highlights the links "between history, memory, nation and citizenship" (Hannoum, 2019, p. 369).

Massive critiques of the *roman national* emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, partly induced by decolonisation (Champier, 2020). At the same time, the "explosion of

memories" called into question the official French memory (Offenstadt, 2009). However, the *roman national* is still strong today and is regularly used as an ideological tool to promote national French identity (Offenstadt, 2009). The former right-wing President and Minister Nicolas Sarkozy used it in reaction to a perceived collapse of French identity in the face of the European Union and globalisation. The current French President Emmanuel Macron used it to counter the activists' actions during the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in France (see 4.).

The failure of questioning its national history and the fall back on a unique and shared French identity show the French fear of *communautarisme*[16], which would represent the end of the national unity (Bancel, Blanchard and Lemaire, 2006; Chabal, 2010; Scott, 2007). This fear of communalism also informed the French integration model that is imposed on immigrants from another culture (even though they were legally French citizens). It finds its origins in the assimilation model during the colonisation of Algeria and supposes that cultural alterity is incompatible with the values of the Republic. (Bancel, Blanchard and Lemaire, 2006). Consequently, people with a cultural background that does not fit into a certain idea of "Frenchness" (defined by the adherence to the *roman national*) must give it up to be able to embrace French values (Bancel, Blanchard and Lemaire, 2006; Huq, 2006). Thus, being considered a citizen is accepting the French collective memory – and forgetting (Hannoum, 2019).

Colonial history is rather placed on the "forgetting" side of French collective memory. The study of schoolbooks is a good way to show how French colonial and national

[16] Following Scott's work, I translated this French term in "communalism". Indeed, Scott indicates that *communautarisme* differs from "communitarisnism". She explains: "In France *communautarisme* refers to the priority of group over national identity in the lives of individuals; in theory there is no possibility of a hyphenated ethnic/national identity—one belongs either to a group or to the nation." (2007, p. 11)

history were related. From the 1920s to the 1950s, the discourse of French school books was emphasising the greatness of the French colonial empire and its civilising mission (Lemaire, 2006). After the waves of independence, Lemaire observes a silence over the colonial period, and from the 1980s, she reports a "memorial schism between colonial and national history", resulting in the marginalisation of the former (2006). She consequently highlights a "knowledge fracture" due to the lack of teaching the history of colonisation and migration. This fracture is even more crucial as for her, the school lies "at the heart of memorial issues" (2006). This provides further understanding of the critique of the school of the Republic made by numerous rappers in their songs, as indicated in Chapter 1.

Thus, France appears to suffer from both a *fracture colonial* and a "knowledge fracture", highlighting how under-addressed the colonial past is. However, some voices try to tackle it for decades now. Indeed, grassroots associations voice these issues since the 1960s. In the aftermath of the 1990s activism for the recognition of the Jewish genocide, French institutions started to consider these associations and their concerns.

3. Memorial laws and memory activism in the 2000s: towards officialisation of the colonial memory?

The 2000s appear as a turning point in renewing the relations between colonial and national history in France. Different memorial laws were promulgated, in line with the implementation of the "*devoir de mémoire*" in the political discourse since the 1990s (Ledoux, 2013; Lotem, 2018; Bertrand, 2006). Indeed, the 1990s saw the inscription in the national history of the French collaboration with Nazi Germany and the active role of the Vichy government in the mass deportation and killing of Jewish people (Ledoux, 2013). This official recognition was upheld by a *devoir de mémoire* ("memory duty", or

"duty to remember") which implied the commemoration of the victims of the French Vichy government during the Second World War and the recognition of the Jewish genocide (in which France took part) (Ledoux, 2013).

This offered a new paradigm in the French official narrative (*roman national*) on which antiracist activists based their claims for the memory of slavery and colonisation (Ledoux, 2013). The expression of a *devoir de mémoire* even penetrated French rap, as Youssoupha claims in "Noir Désir" (2011): "*Où est le devoir de mémoire si l'Histoire souffre d'Alzheimer ?*" ("Where is the *devoir de mémoire* if History suffers from Alzheimer?"). This shows how a framework meant to honour a specific memory (that of the Jews during the Second World War) was used to revendicate another memory (that of slavery and colonialism).

a) The 2001 Taubira law: recognising slavery as a crime against humanity

"Code noir, crime contre l'humanité !
Esclavage, crime contre l'humanité !
Déportation, crime contre l'humanité !"

"*Code noir*, crime against humanity!
Slavery, crime against humanity!
Deportation, crime against humanity!"

Fabe, "Code noir" (1998)

The role of grassroots associations is crucial in the genesis of the 2001 law recognising slavery as a crime against humanity (or "Taubira law"). Already in the 1960s and 1970s, non-official commemorations happened in Martinique to remember the revolt that led to the 1848 abolition of slavery by the French government. Activists built a collective, non-official memory, that was recognised by the state in 1983 (Ledoux, 2013; Lotem, 2018). In 1998, the French state organised the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the 1848 abolition. Grassroots associations saw it as an occasion to "gain

the centre" of the national narrative, asking for the recognition of slavery as a crime against humanity and reparations for the victims and their descendants (Ledoux, 2013; Lotem, 2018). These associations were composed mostly of people from the overseas territories who settled in hexagonal France. These people identified as descendants of enslaved people and were inspired by African American activism (Ledoux, 2013). They expressed critiques of the government's celebrations, saying it was a "republican spectacle" used to emphasise the unity of the nation and separate slavery from the Republican discourse (Lotem, 2018). This confirms the desire of the Republic to push aside this part of French history, which does not fit in the *roman national* (as shown in 1.).

The adoption of the law recognising slavery as a crime against humanity on the 10th of May 2001 was unanimous. Christiane Taubira, the Guyanese delegate in charge of writing the bill, worked toward this aim with grassroots associations and experts (Ledoux, 2013). Using the rhetoric of the *devoir de mémoire* she managed to make dissonant voices heard and inscribe their history and memory into the French official narrative.

Moreover, the 10th of May was instituted as a day of the national commemoration of slavery and its abolition (Lotem, 2018). However, criticism emerged from the right-wing parties that attacked memory politics. Indeed, putting forward a memory diverging from the state narrative was seen as a threat to national unity. In addition, recognising French responsibility for slavery was seen as prioritising a "dark past over the focus on more traditional tropes of national grandeur" (Lotem, 2018, p. 138). These critiques show that the 2001 law did not build a consensus over the memory of slavery

in France. Indeed, the debates over the law of the 23rd of February 2005 show how unresolved the French colonial past is.

b) The law of the 23rd of February 2005: recognising "the positive role of French overseas presence"

One of the most discussed controversies over the memorial laws produced by the French government is the one concerning the law of the 23rd of February 2005, recognising in its article 4 the "positive role of the French overseas presence, notably in North Africa" (Bertrand, 2006; Eldridge2016). This formulation is explained by the theory of "colonisation in two moments", which posits that after a terrible and reprehensible time of violent conquest, a time of modernisation, peace, and solidarity between communities occurred (Bertrand, 2006, pp. 96-97). This theory was the main argument of the supporters of this law.

This can be linked to the international climate, at the time, of what Bertrand terms "the repentance diplomacy" (p. 90). It emerged in the 1990s and reconsiders international relations (specifically those between the Global North and the Global South) in light of the recognition of historical faults (Bertrand, 2006, pp. 90-91). This "repentance diplomacy" thus aimed at redefining memory to put forward the history and memory of those who did not write it. The critique of what is termed as "repentance" by right-wing parties echoes the arguments made by the same parties during and after the debates about the Taubira law. Consequently, the voting of the 23rd of February 2005 law (repealed eleven months later by then President Jacques Chirac) could be understood as an answer to the perceived repentance of the Taubira law.

The discussions and debates over the 2005 law were a manifestation of "memory wars" in France. In that regard, it was more "a controversy about national identity" than a discussion on "how the past should be represented in the present" (Eldridge, 2016, p. 3). These debates and consecutive judicial development show the importance of collective memories of the colonial past in France. Besides state actors, many grassroots actors took part in the debates, which highlights that the concurrence of official and non-official memories was a societal debate.

c) The emergence of new memory actors: memory activism in the 2000s

Grassroots associations played an important role in the 2000s debates over memorial laws in France. Some of them took an active part in the commemoration of slavery. For example, Lotem highlights the role of Caribbean associations to commemorate the revolts that led to the abolition of slavery and their agency in the institution of slavery as a crime against humanity in 2001 (2018). In the early 2000, two major associations contributed to the debate on memory activism in hexagonal France: the CRAN (*Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires* – Representative Council of Black Associations), and the *Indigènes de la République* (IR). Their different approaches to activism illustrates the contrasting strategies for the recognition of communities with an immigrational background in France.

The CRAN was created in December 2005 and marked an innovation in black activism[17] (Lotem, 2018). Indeed, it sought to unite French black people from different origins (former colonies in Africa or the Caribbeans and from overseas territories). At the time, there was a separation in Black activism between Antillean and African groups. This

[17] It is also in line with the work of earlier associations such as the *Ligue de Défense de la Race Nègre,* active in the 1920s (see Gillett, in Panchasi, 2023).

was justified by the fact that they do not share the same history and the same relationship with France (Lotem, 2016 and 2018). For that reason, Lotem identifies the CRAN as "the first organisation that united around the articulation of black identity in France since the idea of *négritude*" (2016, p. 290). Their lineage with Aimé Césaire's concept can be found in their numerous references to its author (Lotem, 2016).

The CRAN was more willing to collaborate with the state institutions. For example, they marched with the state representatives on the occasion of the first official commemoration of slavery and its abolition on the 10th of May 2006[18]. However, they also criticised the planning of the commemoration, which did not give any space to organisations (Lotem, 2018). This demonstrates the goal of the association: it sought to give space to Black communities in France, by showing that Blackness is not incompatible with citizenship and by challenging the dominant idea that addressing racial issues in France would disrupt national cohesion (Lotem, 2018).

These two aspects are crucial. They directly refer, on the one hand, to the issue of French citizenship discussed earlier, which sees itself as universal but is actually focused on the dominant (Bancel & Blanchard, 2006). On the other hand, it mobilises the spectrum of communalism that the French state long sees in the expression of subaltern people and the belief that this expression with cause the collapse of French

[18] The Taubira law (2001) called for the creation of a committee in charge of supervising the memory of slavery on the national territory. However, this Committee was only created in 2004, and was commissioned to find a "date for a national commemoration day of slavery and its abolitions". The report proposing a date was published in 2005, which explain why the first commemoration day happened in 2006 even though the law calling for such a day was voted in 2001 (Lotem, 2018, pp. 134-135). Moreover, it could be noted that two dates were in competition: the 23rd of May was proposed by Caribbean activists fighting for this recognition for a long time (CM98) as the date of their first march (in 1998) commemorating slavery and abolition. They argued it was a way to recognise the long Antillean mobilisation. In the end, the 10th of May was chosen as the date of the unanimous voting of the law by the "elected of the Republic", arguably also giving tribute to the mobilisation of associations that fought for it (Lotem, 2018, pp. 136-137). It is interesting to note these two concurrent dates, each referring to a specific commemoration within the same project memory law: one aligned with memory activism and the other with the national republican narrative.

national cohesion and identity (see Hannoum, 2019; Lotem, 2018 and 2016; Bancel, Blanchard and Lemaire, 2006). The CRAN consequently sought to challenge different myths of the French national narrative that were built by the colonial state and are still present in the 21st century.

Another major grassroots association dealing with the French colonial past is the *Indigènes de la République* (IR). They were created in reaction to the debates and law "against the 'display of ostentatious religious insignia at schools'" also known as the "law of the veil" because it was focusing on the Muslim headscarf (Lotem, 2016, p. 285). They framed this debate in a postcolonial approach, considering this law in line with the colonial "unveiling ceremonies" in occupied Algeria[19]. With this reading of the debates in 2000s France, the IR are in line with Frantz Fanon's thought, to whom they also refer (Lotem, 2016).

The core of the *Indigènes de la République*'s critique is that France is still a colonial state, in need of decolonisation. This is illustrated by their Manifesto published in January 2005 including their famous call to "Decolonise the Republic" which was at the heart of many debates in 2005 (Bertrand, 2006; Lotem, 2016 and 2018). Thus, contrary to the CRAN, the IR were less seeking the unity of people based on their skin colour. They were emphasising the "colonial situation" of the *banlieues*, the discrimination against people from the former colonies, and the growing climate of islamophobia (see Appendix 1).

[19] About the "unveiling ceremony" ("*cérémonie de dévoilement*") in Algiers in 1958, Lotem explains: "[…] a group of Muslim Algerian women […] publicly removed their headscarves to show they had abandoned the darkness and ignorance of traditional Islam for the light of the Republic." (2016, p. 286)

Contrary to the CRAN, the IR focused on a more provocative and radical approach, refusing collaboration with the state institutions (Hannoum, 2019; Lotem, 2016 and 2018). This is reflected in their claim to be "*indigènes*", a term with a strong colonial connotation and characterising the citizens/non-citizens the colonial subjects were (mentioned earlier).

Their "Call" (see Appendix 1), published on the 27th of January 2005, sparked wide debates among French society. In this manifesto, they denounced the discrimination suffered by people with an immigration background as well as the living conditions in the *banlieues*, including police violence (see Bertrand, 2006). They claimed that "France is still a colonial state" or that "The treatment of people with a colonial background perpetuates, without being reduced to it, the colonial policy" (*Les Indigènes de la République*, 2005). This "Call" was signed by numerous and diverse people. Moreover, among its founders is Hamé, from the rap group La Rumeur[20]. This shows the links between political rap and memory activism in the 2000s France and confirms the place of rappers in these memory debates.

The Call of the IR was heavily criticised by various actors on the whole political spectrum: some accused it of communalism (including leftist intellectuals), and historians criticised this call for its historical inaccuracies and denounced a politicisation of history (Lotem, 2018). These critiques show that even among more leftist parties, the colonial past and (what was perceived as) colonial continuities were still a touchy topic, specifically when coming from "subaltern" or "dominated" populations. Moreover, it highlights a historiographic debate as some historians would

[20] See http://web.archive.org/web/20050308095138/http://oumma.com/petition-colonisation.php3?id_article=1355 [accessed 9/06/2023]

denounce a misuse and instrumentalisation of history by non-experts. This is a recurrent debate in light of growing memory activism.

The same kind of critique is made by Béru towards rappers, regretting the "reductionist and simplistic critiques on power relations" under French colonialism denounced in their songs (2011, p. 72). In this light, Hannoum appropriately comments: "A colleague reacted to this statement ["France remains a colonial state"] by arguing today's French state is not a colonial state. What matters for me here is the fact that a group of French citizens see it as such" (2019, p. 376).

Thus, even though these new antiracist organisations did not, at the time, see themselves as "memorial activists", their dissonant voices about French memory of colonialism and their media treatment gave visibility to other discussions, notably about the Algerian War of Independence (Lotem, 2016 and 2018). It addressed the concept of race in contemporary French society as well as put into question the Republic, the nation, and citizenship (Lotem, 2016; Hannoum, 2019; Bertrand, 2006). However, as Lotem concludes, it "did not change power relations between the postcolonial state and its subjects" (2016, p. 294). This is well illustrated by the political reactions to the 2020 demonstrations and protests.

4. "La République n'effacera aucune partie de son histoire"[21]

"Pyromanes et pompiers, votre mémoire est sélective
Vous n'êtes pas venus en paix, votre histoire est agressive"

"Arsonists and firefighters, your memory is selected
You did not come in peace, your history is belligerent"

Kery James, "Lettre à la République" (2012)

[21] "The Republic will not erase any part from its history." (President Macron, 2020)

The failure of memory activism to change the power relationships in postcolonial France seems to still be present nowadays. In keeping with global events in 2020, the French people, however, have confronted internal debates and divisions over the colonial past and its physical traces. In France, as in so many countries, the impact of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has had local consequences. Yet, the French government firmly positioned against the popular demands to reflect on the place of colonial memory in its national narrative.

In June 2020, a Black man, George Floyd, was murdered by a White police officer, Derek Chauvin. The video of Floyd's agony was widely viewed all around the world and sparked global demonstrations in line with the Black Lives Matter movement. As part of these demonstrations, symbols of Black people's oppression in the public space were questioned or torn down. In Bristol, UK, demonstrators took down the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston and threw it into the harbour. It was later picked up and exhibited in the city's museum. In Belgium, a statue of Leopold II was painted in red and tagged, and a petition asking for its removal was issued. In France, statues celebrating the colonial past were also tagged or painted. This was the case with the colonial statues[22] at the bottom of the monumental stairs leading to Marseilles Central Station or of the Colbert[23] statue in front of the National Assembly (Dussart, 2020).

[22] These two allegoric statues represent the "African colonies" and the "Asian colonies". They were created for the Marseille's Colonial Exhibition of 1922 but were inaugurated in 1927 due to delays. Their strategic position at the bottom of the monumental stairs of the Central Station as well as the fact they're part of an ensemble of sculptures representing the activities and greatness of Marseille led activists to vandalise them and ask for their removal or contextualisation.

[23] Colbert is celebrated as one of the great figures of French History for its functions of Ministry in the government of Louis XIV. He notably implemented an interventionist, trade-oriented economy, later named after him ("*colbertisme*"). He pushed French commercial and industrial development during the 17th century. As Ministry of the Navy, he prepared the Code Noir, a legal frame for slavery which was implemented after his death. The activists thus asked for a critical perspective on Colbert, mainly in relation with the Code Noir. One could also wonder if he is the best figure to exhibit in front of the National Assembly, a crucial institution of the French Republic.

These debates had wide visibility in France for several weeks and consequently offer insights into how contemporary France is dealing with its colonial past and memory. A crucial observation was the confusion among politicians (and some historians) between history and memory. This was illustrated by President Macron's declaration that "The Republic will not erase any trace nor any name from its history. It will not forget its works. It will not take statues down" (FranceInter, 2020). Several scientific figures reacted to this discourse, explaining that while history is a scientific discipline, "memory is a political choice of who and what we commemorate" (Viktorovitch in Clique TV, 2020). Similarly, Vergès expressed that the debate about colonial statues in the public space was "an issue of memorial justice and not of history" (in Dussart, 2020).

In line with the government's position, some historians published an article in the newspaper *Le Monde* where they disavowed an "iconoclast fever". They argued that the will to take down symbols of the colonial past was anachronistic, as these figures of the past could not be judged with our modern values (Jeanneney et al., 2020; Champier, 2020). Here again, confusion can be found between history and memory, as putting figures in the public space is not making history but giving tribute to them, which conveys a political ideology (Champier, 2020; also see Cohen, 1989).

The government also accused activists of participating in the collapse of the French nation and identity. Indeed, both President Macron and then Prime Minister Castaner denounced statues vandalism and the questioning of the French colonial past as dangerous communalism (Le Parisien & AFP, 2020). It appears that this imagery is still very much anchored in the French national narrative, and it is still frowned upon that

people – specifically if they belong to a former colonised community – question the colonial past.

Thus, the French state does not seem to take seriously the popular demands for cultural and historical decolonisation. Consequently, the postcolonial critique on the national narrative and national symbols still massively comes from grassroots organisations. For example, in Marseilles, the association Ancrages is dedicated to the history and memory of migrations, and their inscription "in the national heritage". As such, they also fight against "racism, sexism and spatial segregation" (Ancrages, n.d. a). This association thus participated in the debates about the colonial statues in Marseilles and proposed plaques to contextualise them and explain their history (Ancrages, n.d. b). Moreover, society at large seems more involved in anti-racism struggles, as suggested by the large demonstrations in the whole country in the summer of 2020[24] (notably 20 000 people in Paris) (Le Monde & AFP, 2020).

However, it should be noted that some steps have been taken by the state since the 2000s. For example, in 2019 the Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo inaugurated a commemorative plaque paying tribute to the victims of the 17th of October 1961 (Le Point & AFP, 2019). In 1961, during the Algerian War of Independence, the French state imposed a lockdown for Algerian people in hexagonal France, fearing terrorist attacks. The FLN (*Front de Libération Nationale* – National Liberation Front), the major organisation fighting for the independence of Algeria, called people to go against this lockdown in the form of a pacific demonstration in Paris. The demonstrators were very

[24] These demonstrations were part of the French #BLM movement, led by Assa Traoré. She and her family are asking to hold policemen accountable, after the death of her little brother, Adama, at the hands of policemen in 2016 (in similar conditions than George Floyd in 2020).

severely repressed, as the police killed several of them (dozens or hundreds depending on the sources) and threw them into the Seine River.

The memory of this massacre was forgotten for a long time, even more after the Independence of Algeria. While it is important to recognise this step forward, it is in the lineage of similar recognition, as a plaque has already commemorated this event since 2001 (Le Point & AFP, 2019). In 2006, the Franco-Algerian rapper Médine released the song "17 Octobre" as part of his album *Table d'écoute*. This song tells the story of a demonstrator, killed by the police during the event. Wrote in the first person, the song does not refer to a particular demonstrator, but rather a fictional character that could be any one of the many killed this evening. In 2012, Médine's text is included in a schoolbook as material to study the Algerian War of Independence. In addition, former President Hollande recognised in 2012 the "bloody repression" of this demonstration and gave tribute to the victims (Le Monde & AFP, 2012). The memory of the 17th of October 1961 thus took a bit more space in the national narrative but still seems disconnected from colonial history. Furthermore, the fact that it happened on the national territory (and not in a remote colony) could contribute to its recognition[25].

Moreover, it could be argued that the state reactions create a competition of memories. Indeed, as Champier explains, the name of the Marechal Pétain (statues or streets with his name) was removed from the public space in the aftermath of the Second World War (2020; also see Niang, in Bastide, 2020). A hero of the First World War, Pétain, as

[25] Here, I also want to stress that the Paris police prefect who organised the repression of the 17th of October 1961 was Maurice Papon. Papon was later tried for his active role in the Vichy government during the Second World War. Thus, the inscription of the collaboration and French responsibility in the Jewish genocide in the national narrative since the 1990s could have contributed to the recognition of the massacre. Indeed, Papon was already disavowed in the national narrative.

the chief of the Vichy Government, collaborated with the Nazi occupant and organised the deportation and murder of Jews from 1940. With the growing memorialisation of the Shoah, the official recognition of the genocide (Gayssot law, 1990) and the *devoir de mémoire* towards the Jewish community and this part of French history, it was obvious to take Pétain out of the public space. The fact that this memory work and the same kind of reflection cannot happen when dealing with the colonial past can be seen (*a fortiori* by people with a colonial background) as favouring one memory over another. This would reinforce the feeling of people with a colonial background that they do not really belong to French national history and memory.

Conclusion

The difficulty of the French state to effectively tackle its colonial and imperial past comes from a deeply rooted national narrative destined to paint the Republic in a positive light, with the help of figures elevated as heroes of the French *grandeur*. This created a nostalgic view of the French past, deforming history and preventing the state to call the *roman national* into question. In the lineage of the recognition of the Jewish genocide (and France's participation in it) in the 1990s, antiracist associations pushed for a legal frame to the French slavery past. Their voices were finally heard but not without contestations. The 2020 demonstrations put the issue at the forefront of the public debate again. But despite the advancements made in the 2000s, the 2020s government did not operate any self-reflection and condemned memory activism. However, dissonant voices are still very present in today's France, notably through social networks.

As shown in Chapter 1, rap music is also voicing dissonant narratives. Indeed, some artists have long been actors in memory work (see for example Béru, 2011; Mowang

Ngoula, 2021). Rap has been present in the postcolonial critique since the 1990s (see Chapter 1) and sometimes joined memory activism in the 2000s (and afterwards). Specifically, the use rappers make of figures (mainly) from the African anti-colonialist and antiracist struggles can be considered to mirror the French *roman national*, showing their will to put forward their own heroes, forgotten by the national narrative. In doing so, they include their own heritage in a national history that long tried to minimise it. The next section will analyse how rap serves as a form of memory work with a specific focus on three rappers. First, then, it is important to give a short biography of each artist.

Interlude: Artists' biographies

Médine is a Franco-Algerian rapper from Le Havre and co-founder of the independent label Din Records. He distinguishes himself from most French rappers because he does not come from the Parisian *banlieue*, though he grew up in a popular neighbourhood in Le Havre. Since the release of his first album in 2004, he has been part of the political French rap scene. His engagement goes beyond his music: for example, he participated in the meeting-concert organised in 2008 by the *Indigènes de la République* to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the 1983 March for Equality and Against Racism. More recently, in 2023, he publicly displayed his support for the social movement against the government's pension reform by participating in a concert benefiting strike funds or supporting the strikers blocking the Total refinery near Le Havre. On the 50th anniversary of Algeria's Independence, Médine released a song named "Alger pleure" (2012) in which he put face-to-face two different memories of the war, using his voice as a binational:

> *"J'ai l'sang mêlé: un peu colon, un peu colonisé [...]*
> *Médine est métissé: Algérien-Français*
> *Double identité: je suis un schizophrène de l'humanité*
> *De vieux ennemis cohabitent dans mon code génétique"*
>
> "I have mixed blood: a little settler, a little colonised [...]
> Médine is mixed: Algerian-French
> Double identity: I am a schizophrenic of humanity
> Old enemies cohabit in my genetic code"

Artistically, Médine is known for his storytelling, notably his series "Enfant du destin" in which he deals with historical and political events through children's eyes. For example, "Enfant du destin (Petit Cheval)" tells the story of a young Native American witnessing the massacre of his tribe by White colons around the 18th century. This

series can be considered part of a public history approach, a way to introduce historical events through imagined characters. It also often focuses on oppressed people such as the Rohingyas (with the song "Enfant du destin (Nour)"). Moreover, it is not only a way to react to history but also to current political conflicts, such as the Israeli-Palestinian war (with "Enfant du destin (David)" and "Enfant du destin (Daoud)") or the Uyghur genocide (with "Enfant du destin (Sara)").

Médine is a Muslim, and his religion is one of the major themes, mostly present in his first albums: for example, his second album, released in 2005, is named *Jihad, le plus grand combat est contre soi-même*. Beyond claiming his Muslim faith, he also denounces Islamophobia in France, most notably with "Don't Panik" (2008) in which he claims:

> *"Don't Panik!*
> *Muslim, je le suis everyday"*
>
> "Don't Panic!
> I am Muslim every day"

and later:

> *"Tous les jours au centre de la cible*
> *Car tous les jours je suis muslim!"*
>
> "Every day at the centre of the target
> Because every day I'm Muslim!"

In *La Fracture coloniale*, Bozzo shows the "long history of distrust" and suspicion between the French Republic and Islam, which has been going on since the colonisation of Algeria in the 1830s. She shows the difficulty to combine the fact that Islam is a religion to be publicly displayed and the French value of *laïcité* (secularism), implying that religious belonging should not be visible (Bozzo, 2006). This constructed opposition is pointed out by the rapper in a 2005 text where he declares: "In my case,

Islam is an enormous part of who I am, just as being French is. The two aren't in opposition or even mutually exclusive. Yet when you hear the debate in France today, you'd swear they must be" (Médine, 2005; also see Appendix 2).

In June 2015, he released the title "Don't Laïk", in which he denounces the instrumentalisation of secularism in France, as he considers that this principle is mostly used to discriminate against Muslim people. He denounces the hypocrisy of some French public figures who claim that the Islamic headscarf is against the principle of secularism as it is a visible religious sign but who do not expand this critique to jewellery with catholic crosses (for example):

> *"Pas de signe ostentatoire, pas même la croix de Jésus"*
>
> "No ostentatious sign, not even Jesus' cross"
>
> *"Ta barbe rebeu, dans ce pays c'est Don't Laïk,*
> *Ton voile ma sœur dans ce pays c'est Don't Laïk"*
>
> "Your beard *rebeu*[26], in this country it's Don't Laïk,
> Your headscarf my sister, in this country it's Don't Laïk"

With this song, and his critique of both islamophobia and what he considers radical secularism, he was accused of communalism and of being an "islamist rapper".

This shows the long-lasting engagement of Médine both in rap and in French social and political life. The public debates that some of his songs sparked can be a way to create discussion on important topics in the French public sphere (for example on

[26] The term "rebeu" is slang designating Arabic people. It is the *verlan* (backslang) of "beur", itself the *verlan* of "arabe" (de Coppet, 2018). "Beur" was popularised in the 1980s to designate the young generation of people born in France from immigrant parents (mostly form Maghreb). It achieved a peak in the end of 1990s with a so-called "black-blanc-beur France", an expression that was used to designate the multiculturality of the French population and mainly the French football team (see Leprince, 2019). As they won the World Championship in 1998, it was considered as an example of the best outcome that French multiculturalism could produce (Durand, 2002, xiv). The slogan "black-blanc-beur" however appears obsolete today, as the beginning of the 2000s entailed a strong rejection of Muslim and Arabic people in France.

secularism). It can also help to reach more audiences and specifically non-rap audiences. Moreover, his recurrent participation in podcasts or discussions, and the constant self-reflection on his career can contribute to a better reception of his message (and of his music).

Kery James was born in Guadeloupe, a French overseas department, to Haitian parents. He grew up in Guadeloupe and ine Parisian *banlieue*. He started rap music at a young age, collaborating with MC Solaar on the title "Ragga Jam". Around 1990, he created the group Ideal Junior with three friends. Renamed Ideal J after members changes, the group achieved commercial success at the end of the 1990s, with their album *Le combat continue*. Ideal J is a hardcore rap group, with harsh texts. Kery James was also part of the Mafia K'1 Fry, a group including rappers, break-dancers, graffiti writers or DJs.

Kery James converted to Islam after one of his friends was killed because of gang violence. This had an important impact also on his musical production, as his texts are now going against the major themes in rap music. Since his first solo album released in 2001 *Si c'était à refaire*, he raps about the social problems in the *banlieue*, insisting on the importance of education and the danger and illusions of drug trafficking. For example, in "L'impasse" (featuring Béné) (2008), he tries to get one of his friends out of criminality:

> *"Dis-moi ça sert à quoi d'faire des études ?*
> *Ça sert à éviter la bicrave, la violence, la prison*
> *Contempler autre chose que des tours comme horizon, Béné*
> *[...]*
> *Dis-moi ça sert à quoi d'faire des études ?*
> *Ça sert à construire un avenir*
> *Nourrir l'espoir qu'on peut peut-être obtenir*
> *Ce que nos parents n'ont pas pu avoir, Béné"*
>
> "Tell me, what's the point of studying?

> The point is, to avoid drug trafficking, violence, jail
> Contemplating something else than towers on the horizon, Béné
> [...]
> Tell me, what's the point of studying?
> The point is, to create a future,
> Hoping we can maybe get
> What our parents could not have, Béné"

He also promotes unity and solidarity among young people from the *banlieues*, notably with his title "En sang ble" (2008) in which he claims:

> *"Moi jdis qu'il faut supporter les frères tant qu'ils sont en vie"*
>
> "I say we must support our brothers while they're still alive"

and later:

> *"Hey ! Comment tu veux que l'Etat nous respecte ?*
> *Si entre nous on se comporte comme des traîtres !"*
>
> "Hey! How could the state respect us?
> If we act as traitors among us?"

Similarly, his slogan *"On n'est pas condamnés à l'échec"* ("We are not condemned to fail") pushes young people from the *banlieue* (that he often calls "ghetto") to go beyond the destiny of delinquency and crime that society sees for them. In that aim, he created the association ACES (*Apprendre, Comprendre, Entreprendre,* Servir – Learning, Understanding, Undertaking, Serving) offering academic support for deprived children. Moreover, Kery James has been expressing his regret that contemporary rap forgets about its roots as engaged and meaningful music.

This shows that Kery James has been a major figure in French political rap for several decades now, and even though he is not doing hardcore rap anymore, he is still politically engaged and promotes a different imagery of the *banlieue* in his songs. His atypical story, his stances towards the new French rap generation and his seniority in

French rap are often tackled in interviews. It can be argued that it also gives him a certain popularity towards non-rap audiences.

Youssoupha was born in Kinshasa, Zaire (present-day DRC). At the age of 10, he arrived in France to continue his studies and lived in the Parisian *banlieue*. Despite difficult living conditions, he succeeds in his studies of Cultural mediation and Communication. Youssoupha's first solo album, *A chaque frère*, was released in 2007. Originally, he wanted to name this album *Négritude*, referring to Aimé Césaire's concept claiming Black culture and identity (which can be translated as "Blackness"). Fearing misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the term, he changed the name of the album, as he mentions in the song "Négritude", from the album of the same name (2015):

> *"J'ai pris des dollars mais, putain, j'ai pas appelé mon album 'Négritude'"*
>
> "I took some dollars but, fuck, I did not call my album '*Négritude*'"

The concept of *négritude* is one of the pillars of Youssouhpha's music, as it is a recurring theme in his songs. Indeed, his albums *Noir Désir* (or *Noir D*****, for copyright issues[27]) and *NGRTD* are part of a "black trilogy", with similar covers (see *Figure 4*).

Youssoupha co-created (with the rappers Ménage à 3) the independent label Bomayé Music (or BMYE) in 2006. The name comes from Lingala, meaning "kill him". Youssoupha often includes lyrics in Lingala in his songs, as a way to stick to his origins. One of his latest albums, *Polaroïd Experience* (2018), features a title entirely in Lingala,

[27] Noir Désir is a French rock band, active from 1980s-2010. Consequently, Youssoupha could not commercialise his album with this full name.

"Niama na yo". It is an insult meaning "animal" or "idiot", in this song referring to Youssoupha's detractors.

Youssoupha was at the heart of a controversy in 2009 for a line from the title "A force de le dire", where he claims:

> "*À force de juger nos gueules les gens le savent*
> *Qu'à la télé souvent les chroniqueurs diabolisent les banlieusards*
> *Chaque fois qu'ça pète on dit qu'c'est nous*
> *J'mets un billet sur la tête de celui qui fera taire ce con d'Éric Zemmour"*
>
> "By dint of judging our faces people know it
> That on TV commentators often demonise *banlieusards*[28]
> Each time it blows up, they say it's us,
> I'll reward the one who will silence this twat of Eric Zemmour"

Eric Zemmour is a far-right TV commentator well known for his strong racism and islamophobia, who was condemned several times for promoting racial hate. He dislikes rap music, which he called "a sub-culture of illiterate people" (Le Monde & AFP, 2012). Zemmour here considered that Youssoupha was death-threatening and insulting him and tried the rapper. The latter answered with a tribune in *Le Monde* where he explains: "Silencing him? It must be understood in the most elementary sense: putting him back to his place, making him face his contradictions." (Youssoupha, 2009; also see Appendix 3).

With this tribune, he also mentions the judicial harassment against rappers, bringing up the lawsuits filed against NTM (1995), Sniper (2002) and Hamé (2002). Indeed, in the 2000s specifically, numerous rappers have been sued by politicians, mostly for insults against the police. If Youssoupha won the appeal of the trial in 2012, this shows

[28] "Banlieusard" is a term referring to the people living in the *banlieues* in a pejorative way. It is here reappropriated by Youssoupha.

the controversial nature of rap music in France, and the long-standing spectre of rappers as dangerous gangsters (as seen in Chapter 1).

Thus, Youssoupha puts forward in his rap his life as a Black person in France, as well as his multicultural background. The concept of *négritude* also appears central in his work, displaying the pride in his African identity. The controversy that opposed him to Zemmour, and most importantly the answer he published in *Le Monde* contributed to combating the imagery of rappers as dangerous and violent to a wider audience.

Figure 4. Album covers of Noir D**** *(left) and* NGRTD *(right) by Youssoupha. The similarities in the design of the covers suggest a link between these two albums. They are indeed part of a "Black trilogy" planned by the rapper. The pictures show Black angels (a child and a woman) showing determination and grace. The black and white pictures break with the plain white of the background, putting them into the light.*
source: abcdrduson.com (left) and wikipedia.org (right)

This presentation showed how the three rappers are socially and politically involved. They are all well included in the French rap scene and benefit from a wide audience. Their multicultural and historical background is put forward in their work, as they spread non-French references. Moreover, because some of them were taken in public controversies, their music could arrive to non-rap audiences. Therefore, it seems relevant to analyse how they pass on the names of antiracist and anti-colonial leaders

in their songs. The reception of their music is also relevant to study, as it can be argued they touched both rap amateurs and rap “foreigners”.

Part Two: Dissonant memory activism

Introduction Part Two

This part will present the analysis of Médine, Youssoupha and Kery James' texts selected since 2007. The songs have been selected upon the mention of figures or leaders of anti-colonial and/or antiracist struggles (see Sources and Methods). It quickly appeared that these two struggles were linked and could not be separated in the analysis. Moreover, as it has been shown in Chapters 1 and 2, a lot of rappers – among which the artists studied here – consider that the condition of then-colonised people and today's non-White people have a lot in common. The three rappers studied in this chapter are part of the political French rap scene, as they are socially engaged. This places their approach in line with memory activism, as they use their art to revive memories marginalised in the public debate. Moreover, it should be noted that they are concerned by the history of colonisation (see Interlude).

I argue here that rappers are public historians participating in a *devoir de mémoire* in the sense that they transmit, through their music, a historical and memorial perspective. Furthermore, I argue that rappers pass on a dissonant memory, putting forward marginalised figures. In addition, I want to stress that in the French language, "story" and "history" are the same word – "*histoire*". This proximity allows rappers to play with language, designating both personal stories and global history with one word, consequently showing the links between individual and collective memories.

This analysis focuses on the ways Médine, Youssoupha and Kery James introduce and use antiracist and anti-colonial historical figures in their work. Chapter 3 reveals a *devoir de mémoire* at play as the rappers pay tribute to these figures and their inputs in

history, answering to a memorial and historical “duty”. This *devoir de mémoire* focuses on a dissonant memory, away from the French national narrative.

Chapter 4 shows the more personal link made by rappers between themselves and the leaders they mention, linking their conditions and their struggles. Rappers present themselves as heirs of the leaders in the sense that they continue their combat through their own means, which is rap music.

Chapter 5 shows how the anti-colonial and antiracist leaders chosen by rappers are also cultural references for the artists who have a multicultural background (French and Algerian for Médine, French and Congolese for Youssoupha, French and Haitian for Kery James). This can be linked to a will to spotlight other cultures than the French one, as well as display their bond with these cultures.

Chapter 3: *Devoir de mémoire*: remembrance and transmission

Introduction

As explained in Chapter 2, the concept of *devoir de mémoire* is important in the French historical and memorial landscape. Political rappers, as memory activists, use the *devoir de mémoire* through the evocation of different figures of the anti-colonial or antiracist struggles. This is illustrated for example by "Alger Pleure" (2012) and "Enfant du destin (Kounta Kinté)" (2008), two songs where Médine is motivated by a *devoir de mémoire* (Mowang Ngoula, 2021). This willingness to transmit the memory and history of the figures and leaders is shown in songs through three different aspects: making shoutouts, storytelling and demonstrating the inputs of African people to the world.

1. Tributes through "shoutouts"

According to the Rap Dictionary, a shoutout (also written shout-out or s/o) is an "acknowledgement or thanks", conveying respect. In this case, the shoutouts are related to "name-dropping", which is the fact to "mention someone's name (usually someone relevant or important)" (Rap Dictionary). Indeed, in the songs analysed, these two techniques overlap as rappers want to both show respect to important figures and mention their names as a way to keep their memory alive. This can be very well seen in Youssoupha's "Black Out" (2015):

"Kwame Nkrumah, Black Out
Patrice Lumumba, Black Out,
Steve Biko, Black out
Toussaint Louverture, Black Out"
[...]
Thomas Sankara, Black Out
Amílcar Cabral, Black Out
Malcolm X, Mandela, Black Out

Luther King avait un rêve, renoi, Black Out"

"Kwame Nkrumah, Black Out
Patrice Lumumba, Black Out,
Steve Biko, Black out
Toussaint Louverture, Black Out"
[...]
Thomas Sankara, Black Out
Amílcar Cabral, Black Out
Malcolm X, Mandela, Black Out
Luther King had a dream, Black [man], Black Out"

The two choruses of this song name different Black people involved in the liberation of their community. They are figures of independence such as Nkrumah (Ghana), Lumumba (Congo), Louverture (Haiti) or Cabral (Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde), of anti-apartheid in South Africa such as Biko and Mandela, of anti-imperialism and Pan-Africanism such as Sankara (Burkina Faso), or figures of Civil Rights Movements in the USA such as Malcolm X or Luther King.

The title of the song, as well as the "Black Out" following each name, criticise the fact that these figures are put at the margins of history. The double sense of "blackout" as the "total darkening of a city" and the "silence observed by a government regarding certain events and the absence of official comments relating to political dealings", adequately conveys the idea that such figures are not highlighted as they should and have even been marginalised in national narratives. Youssoupha adds another dimension to the term "blackout", as it also refers to the skin colour of these leaders, thus implying that their Blackness, in addition to their fights, is the reason why they are historically marginalised in the West.

The respect for figures or leaders through shoutouts is also illustrated by Médine in "Arabospiritual" (2008):

"Je déclare mon profond respect aux leaders morts

Et laisse une couronne de lyrics sur leurs lits de mort
Du'a pour Malcolm, Luther King et Massoud
Sankara, Lumumba, Arafat Yasser"

"I declare my deep respect to dead leaders
And I leave a wreath of lyrics on their deathbeds
Du'a for Malcolm, Luther King and Massoud,
Sankara, Lumumba, Arafat Yasser"

Different marks of respect are shown here. In the first place, the clear expression of a "deep respect". In the second place, the "wreath of lyrics" instead of a flower wreath, shows that Médine, a rapper, will best express his respect by dedicating a song to the leaders. In third place, the rapper's respect is marked by the *du'a* that he dedicates to them. In Islam, the *du'a* is a "prayer of invocation, calling either for blessing or for imprecation and cursing" (Gardet, 2012). Here, it is more likely that the *du'a* is calling for blessing, as Médine pays tribute to these leaders.

In "Alger Roi" (2017), Médine pays specific tribute to figures of the Algerian revolution. The song opens with a quote by Amilcar Cabral: "The revolutionaries have Algiers". In a 1968 Conference in Algiers, Cabral claimed: *"Les musulmans vont en pèlerinage à La Mecque, les chrétiens au Vatican et les mouvements de libération nationale à Alger*" ("Muslims go on pilgrimage to Mecca, Christians to the Vatican, and the national liberation movements to Algiers"). Indeed, at this time, Algeria aspired to be the spearhead of liberation movements and Pan-Africanism, for example hosting the First Pan-African Cultural Festival in 1969 (Boutata and Robert, 2020). Because of the international image of Algiers as the capital city of revolutionaries around the world, several leaders visited the city. Médine pays tribute to them at the end of "Alger Roi":

"Amilcar Cabral
Les révolutionnaires ont Alger
Malik Shabazz
Les révolutionnaires ont Alger
Frantz Fanon

Les révolutionnaires ont Alger
Jacques Vergès
Les révolutionnaires ont Alger"

"Amilcar Cabral
The revolutionaries have Algiers
Malik Shabazz
The revolutionaries have Algiers
Frantz Fanon
The revolutionaries have Algiers
Jacques Vergès
The revolutionaries have Algiers"

By mentioning all these leaders, Médine stresses their links with revolutionary causes, and to Algiers. Indeed, Frantz Fanon and Jacques Vergès embraced the Algerian revolution and fought for Algerian Independence. Malik Shabazz is another pseudonym of Malcolm X, who visited Algiers in 1964. Finally, Amilcar Cabral is the author of the quote that inspired Médine for this song. They are all linked to Algeria in one way or another, in the same way as Médine is Franco-Algerian.

The theme of the Algerian War of Independence is a recurring one in Médine's discography, and it's a way for him to put forward his Algerian heritage and the figures and events that contributed to the Independence of the country. Because of the silence over the Algerian War of Independence in France, and the long-lasting memorial controversies (Eldridge, 2016; also see Chapter 2), speaking up about Algeria revolutionaries and the outreach of Algerian (political) culture is crucial for Médine.

As shoutouts are one of the most used ways for rappers to pay tribute to estimated figures, it seems logical to find some in these songs. The artists often highlight the revolutionary or activist side of the figures, thus contributing to their recognition as anti-colonial or antiracist leaders. The series of different names also shows the large

number of these leaders, reuniting them in a sort of "Pan-African pantheon"[29]. They are consequently pushed into the individual memory of the rappers' audience, with the ambition to settle in French history. Besides simple shoutouts, some songs refer more deeply to figures, narrating (events of) their lives through storytelling.

2. Storytelling: more than a name, a story

As mentioned in the Interlude, Médine is known for the storytelling of his songs and specifically the series "Enfant du Destin". In "Enfant du destin (Ataï)" (2018), he tells the story of Ataï, the "Komalé chief of the Kanak people" in New Caledonia, and today celebrated as the instigator of the 1878 Insurrection of the native people.

The song mentions the French colonisation of New Caledonia through Ataï's eyes, pointing out different reasons that led to the Kanak Insurrection of 1878. France was profiting from the wood trade, but also evangelising the island and it notably installed prisons and establishments for forced labour. Médine sums up this colonisation in a few lines:

> *"Ils veulent nous faire croire qu'ils sont ici pour l'amour de la croix*
> *Pourquoi nous repoussent-ils de nos forêts moites si ce n'est pour le commerce du bois?*
> *Ils sont arrivés ici avec leur bétail pour y construire des prisons et des bagnes"*
>
> "They want us to believe they're here for the cross's love
> Why do they push us out of our moist forests if not for the wood trade?
> They came here with their cattle to build prisons and establish forced labour"

This succinct summary of the time of French colonisation in New Caledonia is nonetheless filled with important information about some reasons for colonising the island, and some causes of the insurrection.

[29] As noticed by Rachel Gillett in one of our feedback meetings (2023).

Some of the reasons for the insurrection were the degradation of crop fields by colons' cattle and the violation of native tombs by the animals. Indeed, the Kanak people considered their land sacred, which was incompatible with animals going around (Père Apollinaire, 1969, p. 204-207). Similarly, Commandant Rivière wrote in 1880 that the main causes for the Kanak insurrection were the "spoliation, more or less justified, of Kanak lands, and the irruption of cattle in the lands left to the indigenous" (quoted in Saussol, 1979, §59). Thus, this "irruption" is a problem for the crops and sacred parts of the land.

The main event told in the song is the kidnapping of a woman by a colon, who refuses to give her back to her tribe. It is described by Père Apollinaire as one of the causes of the 1878 insurrection (1969, p. 206) and is also attested by Plauchut, who gives a contemporary account of the insurrection (1878). Ataï organises an expedition to recover the woman, killing her kidnapper and burning down his place. Père Apollinaire tells the same story (1969, p. 207).

Médine goes on to tell the death of Ataï and what happened to his remains:

> *"La bataille a débuté, là, ça y est, il combat les traîtres tout en saignant,*
> *Mais un ennemi lui semble familier, serait-ce un Kanak de naissance*
> *Qui, aux colons blancs, se serait rallié ?*
> *Et qui lui tranche le cou au nom de la France*
> *Ataï fut décapité, son peuple colonisé,*
> *Son crâne fut exposé dans les musées, comme un trophée"*
>
> "The battle has started, he fights the traitors while bleeding
> But an enemy seems familiar, is it a native Kanak
> Who would have rallied the White colons?
> And who sliced his neck in the name of France
> Ataï was beheaded, his people colonised,
> His skull was exhibited in museums, like a trophy"

Again, those are attested historical facts. Ataï was killed by natives from the Canala region, who decided to fight alongside the colons (Saussol, 1979; Père Apollinaire,

1969). His skull was indeed studied by the Anthropological Society of Paris and was exhibited in their museum. It joined the collection of the *Musée de l'Homme* from 1951 onwards but was not exhibited. In the 1970s, Ataï became a figure of Kanak's resistance to colonialism, and the New Caledonian government asked for the repatriation of his remains[30]. Ataï's skull was declared lost in the 2000s but was finally found among the objects placed in the *Jardin des Plantes* during the restoration of the *Musée de l'Homme*. It was restituted to New Caledonia in 2014, where it has been buried on the 1st of September 2021, the anniversary date of his death.

This song is in line with the *devoir de mémoire* approach of Médine, as he passes on a story of resistance to French colonisation. The story of Ataï and French colonisation in New Caledonia is not widely known in France, which makes Médine a teacher, passing on the memory of this resistance (also see Chapter 6). The death of Ataï by the hand of another native is representative of the "dividing to better reign" policy which has been applied during colonisation. Moreover, the issues surrounding the study, exhibition and repatriation of his remains are topical specifically in the recent discussions on musea decolonisation. However, the debate is not new (for insights into this discussion see Brus, Knecht & Zillinger, 2020; Hicks, 2020; Simpson, 1996).

Another example of Médine's storytelling is linked to the history of slavery: the song "Enfant du destin (Kounta Kinté)" (2008) is based on a fictional character from Hayley's 1976 novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. However, the author based the character on one of his Gambian ancestors, born around 1750, enslaved and brought to the USA where he died in 1822. In this song, Médine tells the story of his

[30] The repatriation was planned in the Matignon Agreements (1988) which prepared the development of New Caledonia in anticipation of its independence. Indeed, the island is still under French sovereignty but with a specific status allowing it a large autonomy.

capture and his attempt at mutiny during the journey to America. Despite the uncertainties around the existence of Kunta Kinté, it is presented by Médine as a symbol of resistance to slavery (Mowang Ngoula, 2021).

Kunta Kinté is also introduced through his family, notably his parents and his younger brother. It is because Kunta wanted to make a drum for his younger brother that he adventured in the forest, where he was captured. The audience is then invited to empathise with Kunta, who is protective towards his family. This contributes to humanising Kunta, clashing with the dehumanising process of enslavement. Thus, Médine acts as a "poet of collective memory" (Mowang Ngoula, 2021, p. 147).

Moreover, Médine does not hesitate to crudely describe the inhumane conditions in which enslaved people were transported to America:

> *"Le corps gisant dans ses propres déjections*
> *Infection d'une centaine de corps en ébullition*
> *Matières fécales et vomissures purulentes, blessures brûlantes*
> *Sur fond de mort pullulante, fulgurante douleur entre les omoplates"*
>
> "His body lying in his own excrement
> Infection of a hundred boiling bodies
> Purulent faeces and vomitus, burning wounds
> Background of swarming death, searing pain between the shoulder blades"

The violence of his capture is also crudely depicted:

> *"Un coup de fouet réduit ses vêtements en pièces*
> *Un deuxième lui dépèce l'épiderme des fesses"*
>
> "A whiplash tears his clothes into pieces
> A second one skins his buttocks"

Such details about the violence of slavery even before the arrival in plantations can be understood as a way to underline the exactions of slave traders and colonisers. As seen in Chapter 2, the violence of slavery and colonisation is often silenced or diminished.

This leads to diminishing its profound impacts on the colonised populations, but also on the metropolis country. In turn, this can engender historic revisionism, as illustrated (in France) by Article 4 of the 2005 law on the "positive role of colonisation" (see Chapter 2).

One could see a parallel between the efforts to minimise White violence during colonisation and slavery and the denial of public powers concerning the social violence in the *banlieues*. The parallel seems even more relevant as numerous actors (in rap music and grassroots associations) denounce the situation in the *banlieues* as a continuity of colonialism (see Chapters 1 and 2).

In this song, Médine celebrates Kunta as a heroic figure of resistance to slavery, as shows the mutiny attempt he instigates:

> *"Kunta et les autres deviendront des esclaves*
> *Alors profitant d'être sur le pont*
> *Pour l'exercice quotidien, il saisit l'occasion*
> *Le mot mutinerie en Mandingue est prononcé*
> *Et de sa chaîne émoussée il étrangle le geôlier*
> *Bascule à bâbord, c'est le fouetteur qu'il bouscule*
> *A tribord libère ses compagnons de cellule*
> *Bientôt le ponton sera rempli de foyers*
> *D'assez de guerriers pour dérouter le voilier"*
>
> "Kunta and the others will become slaves
> So taking advantage of being on the deck
> For daily exercise, he takes the opportunity
> The word mutiny in Mandinka is pronounced
> And with his blunt chain he strangles the jailer
> Swings to larboard, it's the whipper that he jostles
> Starboard side, frees his cellmates
> Soon the pontoon will be filled with fires
> Enough warriors to divert the sailboat"

But the mutiny is quickly repressed, as slavers have guns. Once again, violence is detailed by Médine, who uses the figure of Kunta as a symbol of all other enslaved people.

This storytelling shows the violence of the slave trade, which is also conveyed by the rhythm of the music. As Mowang Ngoula observes, there are “alternating slow and fast rhythms” (2021). Indeed, when Kunta suffers violence (during his kidnapping) or when he uses violence (during the mutiny) the rhythm speeds up, transcribing the urgency and danger of the situation. As explained in Sources and Methods, a musical analysis is central to a complete study of rap songs. However, due to time constraints, it is not conducted here.

Even though the historical existence of Kunta is not attested, Médine offers with this storytelling a history of the slave trade from the point of view of the enslaved people. This perspective is important, as it is usually not conveyed in the national narrative and memory of former colonisers. However, in the case of France, this dynamic is to be nuanced. Indeed, the Taubira law (2001) largely contributed to putting forward enslaved people’s perspective in the narrative on colonialism and slavery perpetrated by France (see Chapter 2). With this song, Médine is committed to restoring history, aiming at diffusing the memory of victims of slavery (Mowang Ngoula, 2021).

Storytelling appears as an effective way to uncover the history of a character. The historical dimension that Médine puts forward in his storytelling is an added value, acting as a sort of lesson. In that sense, it acts as a *devoir de mémoire* of a dissonant memory, going deeper in details than name-dropping. Thus, it contributes to the spreading of the history (or myth) of a powerful figure. As Mowang Ngoula argues, it can also play a role of inspiration for nowadays’ younger generations of different African countries, who have been ripped off of their heritage by colonialism. Learning about these figures embodying the greatness of African people and the African past could in turn inspire them to build the future of their nation (2021).

3. The greatness of African people

Alongside showing the power of African figures who fought against White oppression (in the form of colonisation or slavery), some name-dropping also refers to the contribution of the African continent to the world. In his song "D'arobaz a zero" (2013), Médine notably gives some examples of some French words coming from Arabic (*"J't'informe que 'amiral' vient du mot 'émir'"* – "For your information, 'admiral' comes from the word 'emir'"). He claims:

> *"Tu parles "spanglish" ? Je parle "franrabe"*
> *Comme Johnny Bachir ? Non, comme Frantz Fanon"*
>
> "You speak "spanglish"? I speak "frenrabic[31]"
> Like Johnny Bachir? No, like Frantz Fanon"

Here, the name of Frantz Fanon is used in opposition to that of Johnny Bachir. The latter is the hero of the movie *Il était une fois dans l'Oued*[32], a young man from the *banlieue* who is certain he is Algerian – despite being born from a Norman mother and an Alsatian father. He changed his real name, Johnny Leclerc, for Abdel Bachir. Thus, the movie plays on both French and (Algerian) Arabic languages, mixing them to create comic situations. Here, Médine constructs the opposition between this superficial and comic mix of cultures and a more intellectual mix, embodied by Frantz Fanon. Indeed, Fanon wrote many different books and essays on anti-colonialism and is one of the leading figures of Third-Worldism and Pan-Africanism. He also supported the Independence of Algeria and considered himself an Algerian citizen despite being born

[31] Just like "*spanglish*" (which is also used in English) suggests a language mix between Spanish and English, "*franrabe*" suggests a language mix between French and Arabic. That's why I translated it as "frenrabic".

[32] The name of the movie plays on the title of the famous western *Once upon a time in the West* (Il était une fois dans l'Ouest in French). "Oued" is taken from the Arabic وادي (*wādī*) meaning "valley, riverbed, river" and referring to rivers in North Africa or Middle East, and to semi-desertic regions.

in Martinique (a French territory). With this opposition, Médine shows how important Frantz Fanon was in the mix of French and Arabic or African cultures, on a deeper level than the French comedy.

Moreover, Médine compares himself to Frantz Fanon and therefore affirms his own contribution to French culture. As a Franco-Algerian rapper, Médine embodies a mix of two cultures and artistically manipulates language. Thus, he wants to show the richness that comes out of it. Doing so, he also denounces the racism of French society and its integration model that supposes a radical and insurmountable opposition between French culture and values and others – specifically from its former colonies (see Chapter 2).

In "Histoires vraies" (2011), Youssoupha also uses figures to evoke the cultural and human richness of the African continent:

> *"J'raconte les épreuves accomplies, les rêveurs incompris,*
> *Les misères, les hivers, les p'tits frères en son-pri,*
> *Les décès, les écoles, les excès, les alcools,*
> *Les machines, les racines de Martin et Malcolm*"
>
> "I tell the overcome hardships, the ununderstood dreamers,
> The miseries, the winters, the younger brothers in prison,
> The deaths, the schools, the excesses, the alcohols,
> The machines, the roots of Martin and Malcolm"

Here, he refers to the themes tackled in his musical repertoire. The "roots of Martin [Luther King] and Malcolm [X]" point out their African origins. Indeed, as African Americans, they were descendants of enslaved people who very likely came from Africa.

Moreover, the fact that the artist does not even precise their full names shows how famous they are. Their names are known all over the world, as well as their struggle

for Civil Rights. By calling them by their first names, Youssoupha creates a proximity with these figures, but also highlights their fame. Furthermore, by pointing out their roots, thus their African descent, the rapper creates a link between their hard and noble struggle and African people and their past and current struggles (against colonialism, against racism, against neo-colonialism).

Another interesting figure found in both Médine's "Self Defense" (2008) and Kery James' "Le retour du rap français" (2009) is Christiane Taubira (see Chapter 2, 3. a)). Her name is associated with memory and history in both songs:

> *"C'est du rap céfran, self défense et bête de sens*
> *On fait du son comme on panse une plaie*
> *Complète le sens de la loi Taubira*
> *N'oublie pas ton histoire ou bien le monde t'oubliera"* (Médine)
>
> "It's French rap, self-defence and making sense
> We do music the same way we bandage a wound
> Complete the sense of Taubira law
> Don't forget your history or the world will forget you" (Médine)
>
> *"Mon rap est Africain, parce que mon rap a une mémoire*
> *Je suis comme Madame Taubira, j'aspire à connaître notre histoire"* (Kery James)
>
> "My rap is African because my rap has a memory
> I'm like Madame Taubira I aspire to know our history" (Kery James)

For Médine, the Taubira law is seen as something that should be completed by both individual and collective memory ("your history", "the world"). The lines of Kery James demonstrate the individual and collective action at the origin of the Taubira law. Indeed, it was initiated by grassroots associations (mainly from overseas France and notably Martinique) who did not feel represented in the national narrative. It was reflecting the need of French people who identified as "descendants of enslaved people" to be included in the national collective memory (see Chapter 2). Both artists restitute the historical and memorial aspects of the Taubira law with their songs.

They directly associate French rap with memory and history, but also with identity. In Médine's song, his French rap is a "self-defence" against the wounds of history and the difficulty to pass on the memory of slavery and colonisation in a country that had so many difficulties to face its colonial past. Kery James mentions French rap in the title of the song, "Le retour du rap français" ("The comeback of French rap"), but here declares "My rap is African". Along the song, he lists the different characteristics of his rap, opposing it to US rap, showing his engagement for young people of the *banlieues*, or claiming its revolutionary aspect. By characterising his rap as both "French" and "African" Kery James states his multicultural background and brings together these two aspects that could seem contradictory but are rather complementary. Similarly, Médine points out he is doing "French rap", thus adding an important identity dimension to the historical and memorial ones. Taubira is presented as a figure working towards the recognition and teaching of French colonial history (specifically of the history of slavery), hence embodying the *devoir de mémoire* in a similar way as rappers.

Conclusion

As seen in this chapter, the techniques of shoutouts and name-dropping are very common in rap music. It is an ideal way to include someone's name in a song and pay respect to this person. It is then no surprise that rappers use it a lot to present or give tribute to historical figures. By using shoutouts, they spread names that are unknown to a lot of people due to their erasure from history, as denounced by Youssoupha in "Black Out" (2015). It is also a way to celebrate figures of resistance to White colonialism or oppression. Storytelling, as used by Médine, is more fitted for past figures who have been mystified through time. However, it does not mean that the

storytelling is not based on historical documents, as seen in "Enfant du destin (Ataï)" (2018). This confirms the role of the rapper as a public historian, passing on history and memory with different means, with a factual basis. It also supports the role of rap music as contributing to a *devoir de mémoire* outside of national narratives (here, mainly the French one).

By putting forward figures that are usually not highlighted (specifically in France), rappers also show the contribution of Africa and African people to the world. Furthermore, the references to figures of resistance add to the idea that cultural mixes produce richness. This is specifically important for these rappers who have multicultural backgrounds. Moreover, it seems even more crucial to show the benefits of a cultural melting pot when evolving in French society (see Chapter 2). The diversity of their origins is therefore often used by rappers to create a proximity between them and the great figures they mention. Positioning themselves as equivalent to or heirs of resistance figures appears as a way to point out their own struggles.

Chapter 4: Connecting past and present struggles

Introduction

Throughout the songs studied, rappers often use different literal processes to create a link between themselves and the figures they mention. This link is mentioned by Béru as allowing artists to highlight the different forms of racism and colonisation they face (2011). I argue this link is created with three techniques: in the first place, there is a clear identification with the figures (mostly through comparison), creating a direct link between the aspect of the figure mentioned in the song and the rapper. In the second place, rappers refer to the figures as models. By doing so, they indicate they are continuing the fight against White oppression. In the third place, rappers insert speeches in their songs, giving voice to the figures. This contributes to aligning political rap with today's antiracist struggles, while the mention of leaders and their fights participates in memory (of) activism.

1. Blending the rapper's and leaders' identities

The identification of the rapper with the figures he chose can be more or less direct. A comparative word can be used to link the rapper and the figure. The most common is "*comme*" ("like"). For example, in "Mouhammad Alix" (2016) Kery James claims:

> *"Pro-palestinien comme Mandela*
> *Je lâche rien comme Lumumba"*
>
> "Pro-Palestinian, like Mandela,
> I don't give up, like Lumumba"

Here, Kery James uses these two figures to describe his struggles, both political and personal. He affirms his support for Palestine and includes it in line with Mandela's

support. Indeed, Mandela condemned the Israeli occupation of Palestine and even compared their situation to that of Black people during Apartheid times in South Africa.

To this political stance, Kery James adds another, more personal claim. It refers to his difficult life and the fact that he did not give up on making rap music, with his objective of helping youngsters out of criminality. Here, the comparison is made with Patrice Lumumba, the major figure of Congolese independence. His struggle for the independence of his country from the Belgian coloniser is compared with Kery James' struggle to get out of the *banlieue* and offer a better future to the children living there.

Moreover, it should be noted that the song's title is a reference to the boxing champion Mohamed Ali. Thus, there are plenty of references to the ideas of struggle or fight with different meanings: struggling in the *banlieue*, struggling to be recognised in the rap world, and fighting alongside other oppressed people.

Médine, in "Médine France" (2022) and "Speaker Corner" (2015), also explores the comparison between himself and resistance figures. He mostly uses it in a personal way, highlighting his dual citizenship:

> *"J'me sens Algérien comme ceux qui l'étaient pas à la base*
> *Jacques Vergès, Franz Fanon et la grand-mère d'Edith Piaf"* (in "Médine France")
>
> "I feel Algerian like those who originally weren't
> Jacques Vergès, Franz Fanon and Edith Piaf's grandmother"
>
> *"J'suis un nouveau franco-algerien comme Jacques Mansour Vergès"* (in "Speaker Corner")
>
> "I'm a new French-Algerian like Jacques Mansour Vergès"

These figures allow him to both show his double nationality and stress his support for the Algerian people. Indeed, both Fanon and Vergès, even though they were originally not Algerian citizens, fought for its independence and its development outside of the

(neo)colonial system. In that sense, it can be understood that even if Médine is not fully an Algerian citizen, he is attached to the country and more importantly to its people, the real heroes of the Algerian War of Independence: "[...] un seul héros / C'est le peuple, et y aura jamais à changer les roles" ("[...] only one hero / It's the people and the roles will never be changed", in "Médine France", 2022).

Another way for rappers to identify themselves with the leaders is to blend their beings. This is done using the verb "to be" in the first person singular: "*Je suis*" ("I am"). One could see this identification as following a tradition of resistance, which defines a specific relationship between the "I" and the collective. One can think of the slogan "*Je suis Charlie*", that spread in the aftermath of the 2015 terrorist attack against the newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*. This slogan was used to show support for the newspaper and was widely repeated in French society, blending the individual into the collective. In the case of rappers, they align themselves with the figures and the collective struggle of non-White people against racism and neo-colonialism.

In "Portrait Chinois" (2008), Médine utilises the game of the "*portrait chinois*" [33] ("Chinese portrait") to display his personality. Thus, the structure of the song follows the "If I was … I would be …" structure of a "*portrait chinois".* The rapper thus includes several references to anti-colonial or antiracist figures such as Mandela, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Aimé Césaire, Rosa Parks, Ahmed Chah Massoud, the Black Panthers, Patrice Lumumba, or Gandhi. He also mentions Coretta King and Sediqa Massoud, the wives of Martin Luther King and Ahmed Chah Massoud (respectively),

[33] A "Chinese portrait" is a game to detect certain aspects of the personality of an individual or to identify their tastes or their personal preferences, through a questionnaire based on the identification with people, objects or various elements.

who shared the activism of their husbands. This song shows the strong political engagement of Médine and the figures he looks up to, as inspirational figures.

Similarly in "L'effet papillon" (2009), Youssoupha claims:

> *"J'suis une Black Panther comme la mère à Tupac Amaru"*
>
> "I'm a Black Panther like Tupac Amaru's mother"

Here, the rapper identifies himself to two figures representing two important aspects of his life. The reference to Black Panthers displays his antiracist engagement and his African origin. The person he identifies with here is the mother of one of the greatest US rappers, Tupac Amaru Shakur. With this reference, Youssoupha positions himself as linked to both the Black Panther activists and a major rap figure.

Beyond "being", "not being" can also be useful in defining a position. To use the example of "*Je suis Charlie*" mentioned earlier, the slogan created the otherisation of those refusing to "be Charlie", accused of compliance with Islamist terrorism. In "Speaker Corner" (2015), Médine positions himself *against* instead of *with* as he declares:

> *"Et j'suis pas le poto à Dominique Sopo"*
>
> "And I'm not pals with Dominique Sopo"

Here, the rapper stands in opposition to Dominique Sopo, president of the antiracist association *SOS Racisme* from 2003 to 2012 and again since 2014. This opposition stems from the political leaning of the association, affiliated with the Socialist Party. Médine shows he is an independent antiracist activist, and answers only to his values and not to a political agenda. The rapper highlights this idea in a 2014 Facebook post where he claims the "importance of self-criticism in antiracist struggle" and the "bane of political exploitation" (Médine, 2014).

Moreover, the rapper here plays on the slogan of *SOS Racisme*, "*Touche pas à mon pote*" ("Don't touch my pal"), signifying further his disagreement with the association and his president.

Finally, another example of identification of the rapper with a resistance figure, but with a bit more distance, can be found in "Musique Nègre" (2016) by Kery James:

> *"Le cul posé, j'ai pris votre place, j'me prends pour Rosa Parks*
> *J'me prends pour Toussaint Louverture bottant le cul de Bonaparte"*
>
> "I laid my ass, I took your place, I take myself for Rosa Parks
> I take myself for Toussaint Louverture kicking the ass of Bonaparte"

Here, the rapper "take[s] [him]self" for these figures, indicating he is a copy or an heir of their struggles. This is of significance in this song, which is an answer to a far-right politician Henry de Lesquen who claimed that rap music was "nigger music" and proposed to banish it from radio stations in his programme for the 2017 presidential election. Thus, Kery James (featuring Youssoupha and Lino for this song) affirms the presence of Black people in France, their contribution to history and the racism they still face today.

With these punchlines, he identifies with the revolt of Rosa Parks and claims a sort of replacement of racists by those they hate (Black people, Arabic people, Muslims…), playing on the theory of the "Great Replacement". This far-right conspiracy theory invented by the French writer Renaud Camus in 2010 argues that French and European populations are being replaced by a North African, Muslim population entailing a civilisation change. Thus, by saying "I took your place", Kery James could refer to this so-called "replacement" as a way to affirm the presence of Black people in French society.

Identifying with Louverture, he mentions his revolt and the defeat he inflicted on Napoleon I while the French Emperor was victorious in Europe (which is little known – see Chapter 2). In doing so, Kery James positions himself in a vindictive perspective towards the French state, embodied by the "great man" Napoleon I. Therefore, he's not only "Toussaint Louverture kicking the ass of Bonaparte" but also Kery James, "kicking the ass" of France.

I have shown that rappers often identified themselves with famous antiracist or anti-colonial figures, through different means. The general idea, however, stays the same: they want to present themselves as inheriting from these figures, joining them in their struggles. Indeed, even though the struggles changed, racism or Islamophobia denounced in rap music are still present. Therefore, rappers both take inspiration and inherit from previous figures in their antiracist and anti-colonial struggle. They see and present themselves, as engaged rappers, heirs of these activist figures.

2. Rappers as heirs of the leaders

Indeed, in several songs, the rappers also stress the heritage that these figures left on their life. It is a personal connection between them that plays an important role in the political involvement of rappers (and consequently also in their art).

In that sense, rappers can present themselves as inheriting from qualities or traits of the figures they look up to. For example, Youssoupha claims:

> *"Pour être libre j'ai la virulence de Kunta Kinté"* (in "Le monde est à vendre", 2007)
>
> "To be free I have the virulence of Kunta Kinté"

or

> *"Chacun de nous a la niak de Chaka Zoulou pour chaque claque reçue sur chaque joue"* (in "A chaque frère", 2007)
>
> "Each of us has the fighting spirit of Chaka Zulu for each slap received on each cheek"

Here, Youssoupha invokes two figures that fought hard but for different reasons. As Médine illustrated in his storytelling song "Enfant du Destin (Kounta Kinté)" (2008), Kunta tried to take over the slave ship on which he was captive (see Chapter 3). Youssoupha rightfully uses him as a figure of freedom and combativeness.

Chaka Zulu, on the other side, is a more contradictory figure, as he is considered a hero of the Zulu empire but also a sanguinary leader. He fought a lot of wars to expand his territory (in present-day South Africa) and brought new military techniques that were later used in the Anglo-Zulu War (1879). However, his legacy is torn apart. On the one hand, some remember his combativeness and his role as the hero of the Zulu nation and builder of its power. On the other hand, some rather remember he caused numerous deaths among his enemies, and even in his own Empire, to assert his power. In any case, Youssoupha here recalls the combativeness of Chaka Zulu, which Black people "inherit" as they also must fight hard for their very existence.

The idea of combativeness is also present in Kery James' "Mouhammad Alix" (2016), as he claims: *"Je lâche rien comme Lumumba"* ("I don't give up, like Lumumba"). The idea to keep fighting despite adversity is a common trope in rap music, specifically in political rap. Here, Kery James uses the figure of Lumumba as a man who fought for the independence of his country, despite imprisonment. It should also be noted that the Pan-Africanism promoted by Lumumba can be aligned with the unity of youngsters from the *banlieue* that Kery James advocates for.

These figures can also be of help to go on in life, as they are thought of as showing the way to go through life's difficulties. This can be linked to the socio-economic difficulties of living in the *banlieue,* which all three rappers (and most French rappers) experienced. Youssoupha exemplifies this quite well:

> *"Quand la liberté me manque, je me demande comment fait Mandela"* (in "Fly", 2011)
>
> "When I miss the freedom, I'm wondering how Mandela does it"

or

> *"Sankara prie pour moi, pour que j'devienne un homme intègre"* (in "Gospel", 2021)
>
> "Sankara pray for me, that I will become an honest man"

These two figures are considered an inspiration for the rapper, almost on a spiritual level. Youssoupha would like to inherit their qualities or be inspired by their lives. As Mandela was imprisoned for twenty-seven years, he is a figure to look up to when one feels they are missing freedom.

Similarly, Youssoupha thinks of Sankara as a model of integrity and honesty, as he is an iconic figure of revolution and Pan-Africanism. He became president of the Upper Volta Republic, a former autonomous French colony, in 1983. The year after, Thomas Sankara changed the French colonial name to Burkina Faso, a mix of two regional languages meaning "country of honest men". Thomas Sankara is thus invoked by Youssoupha as a model whose values should be followed. In "Dangereux" (2007), the rapper similarly claims: *"Au lieu de jacter dans les ténèbres / Essaie de taffer pour que ton label devienne célèbre / Et reste intègre, intègre…"* ("Instead of gabbling in darkness

/Try to work so your label becomes famous / And stay honest, honest…"). The specific use of the word "*intègre*" can here be linked to Thomas Sankara as well.

The idea of honesty and integrity can also be found in Youssoupha's "Les apparences nous mentent" (2007), in which he claims:

> *"J'suis le fils à Malcolm X, rien à foutre de Jacques Mesrine"*
>
> "I'm the son of Malcolm X, I don't fucking care about Jacques Mesrine"

The word "son" used here refers to a spiritual filiation, to show that Youssoupha positions himself in the lineage of Malcolm X, his struggle, and his opinions. The opposition to Jacques Mesrine, a French gangster of the 1970s who is famous for his escapes, is also meaningful. Indeed, many rappers emphasise a "gangster" side (mainly in gangsta rap) to assert themselves as tough guys. It also supposedly confirms their place in the "rap game" (Hammou, 2014).

With this opposition, Youssoupha illustrates he is fighting racism rather than gathering money and killing people like a gangster. This can also be understood as an opposition between his political, meaningful rap and gangsta rap, arguably lacking message and purpose. The opposition between political rap and gangsta rap (or commercial rap) is long-lasting in the French rap scene (see Hammou, 2014; Béru, 2011). Moreover, many rappers (and notably Kery James) regret the massification of rap as a musical genre made to entertain rather than educate.

Besides acknowledging the inspiration that leaders represent, the rappers also show a "historical consciousness" towards the figures. What I mean by this term is the recognition of what the artists owe to them. The rappers recognise the struggle and

progress that leaders brought to society at large. This historical consciousness is illustrated in Youssoupha's "Dangereux" (2007), in which he questions:

> *"Où j'en serais sans Rosa Parks ou Toussaint Louverture?"*
>
> "Where would I be without Rosa Parks or Toussaint Louverture?"

The rapper here puts their fights on the same level, respectively against segregation in the 1950s USA and French colonialism and slavery in Haïti at the end of the 18th century. That way, he stresses the progress they contributed to, as well as their bravery in opposing a powerful oppressor. A feeling of gratefulness can come out of this punchline, as Youssoupha, as a Black man himself, would (arguably) be in an even worse situation if people like Parks or Louverture did not raise their voices. Therefore, this line can be understood as a recognition of past struggles and of the people that led them.

Historical consciousness is even more clearly expressed in "Noir Désir" by Youssoupha (2011) where he states:

> *"Récupérez vos Voltaire et vos Guevara*
> *Mon Histoire est écrite par Frantz Fanon et Sankara"*
>
> "Take back your Voltaire and your Guevara
> My history is written by Frantz Fanon and Sankara"

The rapper here opposes historical figures to highlight his own. Voltaire is a French writer and philosopher of the Enlightenment and is considered one of the greatest French thinkers. He is a major figure in the French *roman national* and he was the second person to be buried in the Pantheon, in 1791 (see Chapter 2). One cannot go through French school without learning about his work and life. However, Youssoupha takes distance with this figure, because he is so important in French culture. Similarly,

Guevara is considered a hero of the Cuban revolution, and a major figure of Pan-Americanism. He was also strongly opposed to the USA and its interventions on the American continent.

Youssoupha consequently prefers to highlight African figures, drawing a parallel between the figures he rejects and the ones he embraces. To Voltaire, the rapper opposes Frantz Fanon, born in Martinique but who claimed Algerian citizenship as he actively supported the independence of Algeria. Similarly, Sankara is opposed to Guevara, as he is a leading figure of Pan-Africanism. Both Fanon and Sankara fought for the recognition of Algeria and Burkina Faso (respectively) as independent countries, free from French colonialism. Beyond their struggles, Youssoupha stresses their African origin, which brings all of them together. The rapper emphasises African figures, as he has African origins (from Zaïre/DRC). This is also a way to show this heritage and his love for the continent.

Moreover, Youssoupha plays on the double meaning of "*histoire*" with this punchline. Here, he could refer to a collective history (which he takes part in) "written by Fanon and Sankara" as leading figures of independence from French colonialism. But it could also be a personal story, meaning he led his life taking as example figures such as Fanon and Sankara both for their African origin and their activist engagement.

Indeed, rappers also use the figures to position themselves as heirs of the struggles fought by their celebrated predecessors. If this positioning is constant in most of the songs analysed, it is clearly expressed by Médine in "Speaker Corner" (2015), as the rapper claims: *"Anti-colonial #JeanJaurès"*. Doing so, he affirms his struggle against anti-colonialism – or rather neo-colonialism. The rapper also stresses his support for anti-colonial figures he often mentions in his songs. The use of Jean Jaurès as an anti-

colonial figure is interesting because it's a rare instance where a White person is used to embody an anti-colonial or antiracist struggle.

In the French national narrative, Jaurès is usually known for his socialist engagement and notably his pacifist stance at the dawn of the First World War (which led to his assassination in 1914). Here, Médine rather puts forward the anti-colonial struggle of Jaurès, highlighting an aspect of his life that is less well-known. This contributes to enriching the historical knowledge of his audience, therefore both participating in a *devoir de mémoire* and presenting Médine as continuing this struggle.

The name of the song is also revealing this heritage. Indeed, speakers' corner refers to public places where people are encouraged to express themselves on different topics. In Hyde Park (London, UK) specifically, the speakers' corner was a place where a lot of Pan-African leaders used to speak. The title of his song thus directly puts Médine in line with these leaders. The rapper, too, is using the public space to denounce issues in French society such as the hate of immigrants, Islamophobia or the demonisation of rap music by mass media and politicians.

Thus, I have shown that the leaders of anti-colonial and/or antiracist struggles are considered by the three rappers as models to follow. Their qualities and mainly their activist fights are put forward by Médine, Youssoupha or Kery James, who also position themselves as their heirs. The figures can be inspirational people for the conduct of everyday life but also represent a collective fight, as well as the collective history and memories of this fight. The rappers also often highlight that a similar struggle is still going on, which is better illustrated by the use of speech extracts within the song.

3. The continuity of struggles

The artists studied sometimes use speech extracts in their songs. It is mostly used as an introduction or outro of the song, but can also be incorporated within the rapped part. Only a few figures are represented in the different songs: Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Patrice Lumumba and Aimé Césaire.

Malcolm X is used both in Médine's "Self Defense" (2008) and Youssoupha's "One Love" (2007). The speech is one of his most famous ones, usually referred to as "By any means necessary" (1964). It is a formula often used in this speech, meaning that the activists for Civil Rights consider every option to end the segregationist system, including violence.

> "We declare our right on this Earth to be a man, to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being in this society, on this Earth, on this day, which we intend to bring into existence by any means necessary."

In both songs, Médine and Youssoupha use this extract as a way to show the continuity between the segregationist system in the USA and the situation of immigrants (or people perceived as immigrants) in France. For example, right after Malcolm X's speech extract, Youssoupha declares:

> *"Qui fait le sale boulot en France ? C'est nous !*
> *Les plus haïs c'est nous ! Qui subit les violences de la police ? C'est nous !*
> *Qui vit dans du béton pourri ? C'est nous !*
> *[...]*
> *Qui sont les sans papiers ? C'est nous !*
> *Qui sont les proies des procureurs qui cherchent à nous parquer dans les prisons ? C'est nous !"*
>
> "Who does the dirty work in France? It's us!
> The most hated are us! Who suffers police violence? It's us!
> Who lives in rotting concrete? It's us!
> [...]
> Who are the undocumented? It's us!
> Who are the prey of the prosecutors who seek to park us in prisons? It's us!"

The verse following Malcolm X's speech in Youssoupha's song criticises the condition of Black people in 2007 France and shows that the declarations voiced by Malcolm X in this speech are still not fully achieved in the 21st century. That way, the rapper also introduces a discussion between himself and the leader.

In "One Love" (2007), Youssoupha uses speech extracts from Martin Luther King and Patrice Lumumba. The former is from the most famous speech of Luther King, "I Have a Dream" (1963). The extract used is the end of the speech:

> "We will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last! free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'"

As the extract is placed at the start of the song, the continuity between Martin Luther King's Youssoupha's discourse is even more highlighted. Moreover, it also shows a strong opposition between the hope conveyed by the speech and the harsh reality Youssoupha is detailing in the song. This can also be found in two songs by Kery James ("Musique Nègre", 2016 and "Marianne", 2022), in which he opposes the "dream" of MLK to a "nightmare" he's having. This nightmare is about the racism and islamophobia that he identifies as major issues in French society. Thus, the rappers show how sixty-year-old discourses are still relevant, justifying their fight.

In "One Love" (2007), Youssoupha chooses as outro a speech extract of Patrice Lumumba, saying:

> *"Nous devons opposer aux ennemis de la liberté la coalition des hommes libres. Poursuivant la lutte dont l'objectif primordial est de sauver la dignité de l'homme africain, le peuple congolais a choisi l'indépendance."*
>
> "We must oppose the enemies of freedom with the coalition of free men. Continuing the struggle whose primordial objective is to save the African men's dignity, the Congolese people have chosen independence."

The speech was given by Lumumba in 1960 at the Pan-African Conference in Leopoldville (DRC). In this discourse, he stresses the Independence of Congo obtained ten days earlier, as well as the necessity of a Pan-African project on the continent. The choice of this extract to close the song appears as a suite to the second verse, denouncing the inequalities in French society and advocating for a "renewal" of the "human species", opposing "one love" to the hate pictured in the song.

"One Love" is therefore structured as follows: speech – verse 1 – speech – verse 2 – speech. With this strategic placement of speech extracts, Youssoupha to effectively include them in his discourse. They are used in place of choruses, which stresses the importance of these speeches, their message, and their authors. In addition, the continued instrumental in the background reinforces the continuity between the struggles of the leaders and today's Black people, and between the leaders' and Youssoupha's discourse is reinforced by the continued instrumental in the background.

I have argued that speech extracts are a way to connect the rapper to the figure mentioned in two ways. First, it can be used to reinforce or confirm the rapper's discourse. Second, it can be a way to highlight the continuity of struggles, and here more precisely the necessity for Black people to continue fighting White oppression. Finally, the inclusion of speech extracts in the song studied is linked to activism and the perceived need to spread knowledge over the history of minorities (mainly Black people).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen that figures of resistance to White oppression are linked to the rappers in a way that reinforces their activism. Beyond historical figures, they

are included in different songs as leaders of socio-historical struggles, and their activism is put forward. This connects them to the rappers studied, as they make political rap. Indeed, this kind of rap passes on a message and has a purpose, but more importantly is a struggle, too. Rappers can thus be seen as a new kind of leader, using rap music to continue the struggle of their models. In that sense, music appears as one of the means to affirm the existence of minorities.

However, figures can also be mentioned outside of an activist goal, as plain cultural references. Indeed, as Médine, Youssoupha and Kery James have a multicultural background, it seems coherent that they put forward different references than those that are part of French culture (and consequently taught in French schools).

Chapter 5: Figures as historical-cultural references

Introduction

Rappers also sometimes choose to put forward figures as cultural landmarks, linked to the African continent. This makes the connection with their multicultural and historical background, while they highlight other aspects of the figures, beyond their activism. Moreover, I argue it sheds light on different cultures than the French one, where mostly White people are put forward. In that regard, it also contributes to including them in collective memory.

1. A (historical-)cultural rewriting

In some instances, the rappers studied operate a sort of cultural rewriting, meaning they change common expressions. More specifically, they change the names mentioned in the expressions to instead use a name referring to their historical-cultural background. Two examples illustrate this play with language.

In "Rendons à Césaire" (2007) and "Négritude" (2015), Youssoupha 'rewrites' the expression *"Rendre à César ce qui appartient à César"* ("Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar"), taken from the New Testament. This quote, attributed to Jesus, is often heard in this form, but the full quote is "Give back to Caesar [here understood as "emperor"] what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God". Nowadays, it is used in the sense to give the credit of something to its rightful author. In both songs, Youssoupha replaces "Caesar" with "Césaire", therefore paying tribute to the author who coined the concept of *négritude*. This concept, as previously mentioned, is at the centre of Youssoupha's work, which makes the references to Césaire expected.

As mentioned earlier (see Interlude), Youssoupha's first album should have been named "Négritude", but it was deemed too risky. In both "Rendons a Césaire" and "Négritude", he stresses this conflict within himself: *"[...] la négritude est un sujet qui fâche"* ("Blackness is a touchy topic"), *"Tous ces chocs et ce tapage juste à cause du titre d'un album"* ("All these shocks and fuss just because of an album's title"), *"Mais putain j'ai pas appelé mon album 'Négritude'"* ("But fuck, I did not name my album 'Négritude'").

With this rewriting of the New Testament quote, Youssoupha acknowledges the input of Césaire in his work as a poet/rapper, as well as Césaire's contribution to Black culture and history.

> *"J'ai imité le poète en reprenant ses termes*
> *Je rends à Césaire ce qui appartient à Césaire"* (in "Négritude", 2015).
>
> "I mimicked the poet by using his terms
> I give back to Césaire what belongs to Césaire"

Another cultural rewriting can be found in Kery James' "Le poète noir" (2022):

> *"On me tue chaque jour dans la langue de Molière*
> *Je rends chaque coup dans la langue de Césaire"*
>
> "I am killed every day with Moliere's language
> I give back each punch with Césaire's language"

The expression "la langue de Molière" is a periphrasis designating the French language, conveying the idea that Molière was so good with words that he influenced the whole language. Kery James denounces the (mostly racist) insults he receives from French people and answers them in the same language.

The two figures are here in opposition, but not because they do not share the same language, despite what the expression would suggest. They are rather culturally

opposed, as Molière is considered a French great man, taught and analysed in schools. On the other hand, Césaire is not taught in school, and despite the fact he was a French politician, his work on *Négritude* (Blackness) contributed to his marginalisation from the French national narrative. With these lines, Kery James stresses both the Frenchness of Césaire, as well as the role he had in the rapper's poetic work – in the same way as Youssoupha.

This "cultural rewriting" appears as a way to put forward different figures than the one already included in the French national narrative and show the contribution of Césaire to the rappers' work. Indeed, it is more his work as a poet and writer that is put forward, rather than his political engagement. It shows a cultural emancipation from the French references, to put forward their own. Moreover, it expresses a reappropriation of the French language, coherent in the work of rappers, who mould language. As the artists promote different cultural figures, they also sometimes use them to simply illustrate their claims.

2. Supporting rappers' arguments

I argue that figures are also used as plain cultural references because rappers can put them forward as an illustration of their statements. If rappers can still highlight the activist side of the figure's lives, it is not the main point of the mention. For example, Youssoupha and Kery James use leaders' names to denounce racism against Black people. In "Boma Yé (remix)" (2014), Youssoupha features four other artists. One of them (Sam's) claims:

> *"Pays raciste, français, tu mens, t'es là*
> *Crache sur l'épiderme terne de Miss France puis va poster 'RIP Mandela'"*
>
> "Racist country, French, you're lying, you're like

Spitting on Miss France's matt skin then posting 'RIP Mandela"'

This punchline refers to the recent (at the time) death of Nelson Mandela and the election of Flora Coquerel as Miss France 2014 (both happened in December 2013). After her election, Coquerel received numerous racist messages (Simone Media, 2022). Thus, Sam's is denouncing those participating in the harassment against Coquerel but in the meantime paying tribute to Mandela (who fought for the end of apartheid) on social networks.

Similarly, Kery James denounces racism specifically in the USA, with the song "PDM" (2018):

> *"Martin, Malcolm, chaque fois qu'un nègre s'est levé*
> *Dites-moi dans quel pays du globe, étonnement, ce nègre s'est fait crever*
> *Bien sûr c'est comme ça que ça se passe au pays des tueurs de masse"*
>
> "Martin, Malcolm, each time a nigger stood up
> Tell me in which country, surprisingly, that nigger was killed
> Of course, that's how it goes in the country of mass killers"

This song is an answer to a declaration by Donald Trump while he was President of the USA, who claimed that several African nations, El Salvador or Haiti were "shitty countries". Kery James then goes on to criticise the USA, arguing that *they* are a "shitty country". He uses the example of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X to support his stance, claiming they stood up for their rights and were killed in the USA (also denouncing the pro-gun position of the country). Through this use of figures, Kery James also pays tribute to the dead leaders, showing their struggle continues today as racism is still present, even in the highest political positions (as Trump illustrates).

However, it could be argued against this statement that it is easier to get killed in the country you are living and fighting for your rights – as was the case for Luther King and

Malcolm X. In addition, it can be noted that Malcolm X was killed by other activists for Black Liberation, who disagreed on his methods (see below). Consequently, the use of the leaders to support this argument is not specifically relevant.

In that case, both rappers use figures of Black leaders for Black liberation to denounce the still existing racism against Black people, but also the hypocrisy of it all. Even though the main point here is not to put forward their activist engagement and their struggle against racist systems (apartheid or segregation), this aspect can seem inseparable from the figures. Consequently, it also appears as a sort of tribute to these leaders and their struggles.

Kery James is very involved in the social elevation of youngsters from the *banlieue* (see Interlude). In that sense, he advocates for unity among them, instead of gang fights. In "Dernier MC" (2013), he denounces the lack of unity among Black people, which, he argues, leads to their weak position in society (*"Les Noirs sont affaiblis, oui, parce qu'ils sont désunis"* – "Black people are weakened, yes, because they are not united"). Thus, he claims:

> *"Tu es manipulé, tu brises l'unité*
> *C'est par des nègres comme toi que Malcolm X fut assassiné"*
>
> "You are manipulated, you break unity,
> Malcolm X was killed by niggers like you"

Here, the mention of Malcolm X is focused on his assassination, by members of the Nation of Islam (NOI), an organisation he was previously part of. Because of ideological and religious dissensions, Malcolm X left the NOI in 1964 and founded the Organisation of Afro-American Unity the same year, inspired by the Organisation of African Unity (which he discovered during a journey across Africa in 1963). His assassination, in

1965, shows the strong dissension among Black activists in the USA during the Civil Rights movement.

Therefore, Kery James uses the figure of Malcolm X and his assassination to call for the unity of Black people. Malcolm X, at the end of his life, was advocating for unity and solidarity among Black people, regardless of their religious faith or political views. This is similar to what Kery James is defending, and the figure of Malcolm X illustrates well this position.

Another example of a leader used to illustrate a statement can be found in "Entre les lignes/Ma part de Jihad" (2008) by Médine:

> *"C'est comme ça qu'on fonctionne et qu'on grandit*
> *Mais les choses ont un sens comme les vêtements de Gandhi"*
>
> "This is how we work and we grow
> But things have sense, like Gandhi's clothes"

Here, Médine refers to the *dhoti* that Gandhi used, a traditional Indian costume. This outfit was worn by Gandhi as a political statement, representing his identification with the poor rural population of India. Moreover, as he made it himself, it was a guarantee to not support the exploitation of workers in textile factories. Finally, the *dhoti* is a simple, plain piece of cloth, which was in line with his pledge of simplicity. With this line, Médine uses the meaning behind Gandhi's clothing to encourage looking beyond the obvious and show that the simplest things can have a deep meaning.

Hence, this use of anti-colonial figures to exemplify rappers' statements shows that these leaders are also cultural references for rappers. However, the reference to their activism is not fully erased. This suggests that these figures are also part of a culture of struggle, which they share with the rappers.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that rappers also use figures both cultural references. By highlighting other activities than activism, rappers contribute to painting a more complete portrait of the leaders they mention. Moreover, it shows how rappers incorporate their multicultural background in their songs, as they take inspiration from the non-French part of their identity. However, it has been shown that activism is always underlying in the texts, suggesting that both the figures and the rappers share a culture of struggle. Therefore, it can still be considered as a contribution to a dissonant memory, putting forward mostly African figures (or figures with an African origin) in the French cultural landscape and collective memory.

Conclusion Part Two

The analysis of Youssoupha, Médine and Kery James' texts since 2007 reveals that leaders (or figures) of anti-colonial and antiracist struggles are prominent in their songs. The figures used are not only related to the French colonial past but to a wider range of anti-colonial and antiracist struggles around the world (such as figures of the Civil Rights movement in the USA or the Congolese Independence). This suggests that rappers are not only going against the French narrative but also including their art in a wider perspective, understanding racism as a global issue.

I have shown that rappers put forward leaders' names in the first place through shoutouts, to pay respect and tribute to them. Sometimes, their stories are more detailed, through storytelling. The name-dropping sheds light on leaders while denouncing their marginalisation in history, contributing to their reinstatement in the individual memories of the audience. In parallel, rappers intend to show the contribution of the African continent and its people to history, and specifically to the liberation of Black people around the world. Rappers thus propose a *devoir de mémoire* focused on a dissonant memory of French colonial past. Moreover, as they invoke figures from the USA or former non-French colonies, they outline a global memory of anti-colonial and antiracist leaders.

Rappers also use anti-colonial and antiracist figures to connect themselves with the leaders, through different means of identification. This close connection is reinforced by the multicultural background of rappers as well as their current struggles. Indeed, the artists often present themselves as heirs of the leaders, continuing their fights. This is not to say that they are 'deemed' to be their heirs, but it is rather understood as a continuity of the leaders' struggles. Indeed, this connection is often in line with the

denunciation of racism or the difficult everyday life in the *banlieue*. Therefore, it connects with the claim that the situation in the *banlieues* is a continuity of the colonial situation (specifically in its management by the state). The continuity of combat and the theme of social (and racial) struggle are major topics in the texts studied, suggesting that artists use rap as a means of struggle itself.

Finally, I showed that figures are 'preferred' cultural references for rappers, highlighting their non-French identity (beyond their characterisation as struggle leaders). In that sense, the artists studied consider their rap as a way to pass on knowledge and 'teach' history through great names. Thus, their approach is part of a dissonant collective memory, aiming at shedding light on figures eclipsed by the French narrative.

Médine, Youssoupha and Kery James therefore clearly appear as memory activists and "passers of memories" (Mowang Ngoula, 2021). Doing so through the names of great men (and very few women) stresses their dissidence with the French national narrative. However, as they also mention leaders unrelated to French history, they have a more global perspective on the liberation of (mainly) Black people.

We can see a parallel between the French national narrative upheld by its "great men" and the work of rappers, transmitting a dissonant memory through great names. Like in the national narrative, the leaders are usually presented as heroes, which leads to less historical accuracy. Rappers here create a sort of "continental narrative", emphasising the greatness of African men through history. The emphasis on solidarity and unity among Black people also suggests a "Pan-African narrative".

The heroisation of African leaders by rappers is criticised by Béru (2011) who sees historical inaccuracy and history simplification. For Helenon, these inaccuracies can partly be imputed to the French school system that does not teach their history and consequently leaves space for divergences (2006). However, I would nuance this critique by stressing that rappers are not historians (and do not claim to be), but rather public historians. This means they contribute to the transmission of history and memories, but not that they are tied to historical methods. In addition, they often acknowledge and even claim their socio-historical position, consequently informing the audience of their biases[34]. In turn, their audience can consider how to receive their texts in light of their own position. The reception of rappers' texts, and specifically of their use of figures and history is analysed in the next section.

[34] Most scholars agree that there is no such thing as objectivity in historical studies. Indeed, the person conducting the study is always socially and historically situated. One "good practice" is to acknowledge this position to inform the audience about one's potential biases (see for example Jordanova, 2019)

Part Three: Reception of rap's postcolonial critique

Introduction Part Three

As seen in previous chapters, the work of Médine, Youssoupha and Kery James is embedded in a public history approach. Indeed, the rappers transmit historical and memorial knowledge, using leaders' names as a *devoir de mémoire*, or cultural reference. Moreover, they also create close ties between themselves and the leaders, showing the continuity of their struggles. For this transmission to be efficient, the reception of this knowledge has to be assessed. This reception should consider both target and non-target audiences. Indeed, I argued that rap music, because of its large audience and social relevance, has a role to play in public discussion.

Chapter 6 will review the different ways that the target audience of Médine, Youssoupha and Kery James receive the historical and memorial knowledge they pass on. An analysis of the YouTube comments section of each song studied in this research has been conducted, to assess the extent to which rappers transmit historical and memorial knowledge. This source has been chosen because YouTube is a major way of listening to music, and it also encourages interactions with the songs through the comments section (see Sources and Methods). It reveals their audiences benefit from the historical and memorial knowledge proposed by the rappers, mainly through the creation of networks.

Chapter 7 is dedicated to studying the reception of the artists' work, both in generalist press and specialised press. Indeed, if it is expected that specialised press gives more attention to the rappers' texts (including historical content) and motivations, it appears relevant to also analyse generalist press for several reasons. The latter has a wider

audience, is distributed both online and in paper format, and reflects more accurately the state of the public debate in French society. The generalist newspapers chosen for this analysis are *Le Monde* and *Libération* (see Sources and Methods). The specialised press sources are taken from the websites Abcdr du Son and Le Rap en France, as well as Karim Hammou's blog, Sur un Son Rap (see Sources and Methods).

Several questions have been defined to analyse the reception (for both chapters). The general goal is to understand how the audience is reacting to the knowledge transmitted by the rappers, with an added focus on the figures' reception.

- Does the audience feel like it has acquired new knowledge related to postcoloniality after listening to the song? How does it position itself in relation to that (emotional response)?
- Does the audience add knowledge/commentary of their own, thus helping to build the public memory?
- Do they identify their own background/ethnic position and connection to the material?
- How does the audience comment specifically on the figures mentioned in the song?
- Does the song trigger a public discussion? Do commentators consider it a new one? Do they consider that it brings new insights?

Before delving into the analysis (Chapters 6 and 7), I will briefly present the place of rap music in French society. The evolution of the consumption of rap music in France can be drawn thanks to the surveys on the *Pratiques culturelles des Français* (PCF – Cultural practices of French people), edited every ten years. Hammou and Molinero, in a chapter of their recent book, *40 ans de musiques hip-hop en France,* analysed the place

of rap and RnB in French cultural practices. As the detailed results of these surveys are not available online, the data and analysis of the following part will rely on Hammou and Molinero’s chapter. It shows the extent of rap music consumption in France, allowing to define it as one of the most listened genres, specifically among younger audiences.

Rap in France: A "doubly popular" music genre

The PCF surveys have been conducted since 1973, and rap music appears as a genre for the first time in the 1997 survey. It reveals that 5% of the surveyed people say they listen to rap music. This percentage rose to 14% in 2008 and 30% in 2018 (see *Table 1*). The first results suggest that rap music largely widened its audience in France during the last few decades.

Hammou and Molinero highlight the renewed method used for the 2018 survey, which allowed the respondents to answer spontaneously about their music preferences (instead of picking the genre in a pre-made list). Thus, between 11 and 13% of the respondents spontaneously mentioned a preference for hip-hop music (depending on what is intended behind the term). Moreover, beyond preferences, the 2018 survey shows that 38% of respondents said they were listening to hip-hop music (rap and RnB), making it a popular music taste.

The PCF surveys also allowed to highlight some characteristics of rap audiences. Rap is mainly consumed by young people, as observed since the introduction of the genre in the surveys. In 1997, 17% of people between 15 and 24 years old declared listening to hip-hop and rap, and this share raised to 44% in 2008 and 71% in 2018 (see *Table 2*). However, it is also worth noting that older generations started to listen to hip-hop and rap music. The share of 55-64 years old listening to rap music went from 0% in 1997 to 2% in 2008 and finally 8% in 2018. Similarly, the share of 65+ years old listening to rap music was 3% in 2018, 1% in 2008 and 0% in 1997.

Moreover, the 10-year range of age categories as well as the 10-year range between each PCF survey allows to follow the generations in their music tastes (Hammou and

Molinero, 2022). Thus, the 15-24 generation of 1997 is the 25-34 generation of 2008 and the 35-44 generation of 2018. This age range was the first generation in France to be exposed to rap music and to witness the emergence of French rap music. We can observe that for this same generation, there is an augmentation of 4 points between 1997 and 2008 and 17 points between 2008 and 2018. This means that, in addition to the retention of rap audiences from the first generation, people from this same generation started to listen to rap music later. Therefore, rap music transcends age barriers as it is more and more consumed by older people and gathers new publics. However, youngsters still constitute the widest audience.

Rap music is also popular in the sense that its audience mainly comes from a modest social background. In their chapter, Hammou and Molinero underline that because of the young age of a large part of the rap audience, they analysed the social class depending on the socio-professional category of the head of the household (2022, p. 121). Thus, we can observe that in 2018 roughly half of the people listening to rap music is from a worker's household (see *Table 3*). For the same year, the second largest group is that of the intermediary professions, confirming the middle class as a major rap audience.

Hammou and Molinero thus characterise rap music in France as a "doubly popular" genre, as it is both widely spread and consumed mostly by modest social classes (2022). The PCF surveys also reveal that it is mainly listened to by youngsters, though the age barriers are blending. Finally, the gendered division in rap music audience appears less and less relevant, even though men are still the major audience.

However, the authors stress that these data should not diminish the diversity of rap audiences. Indeed, in addition to listening, several other cultural practices put forward

this diversity, such as hip-hop dance practice or amateur rap or RnB practice (writing, rapping, creation of music) (Hammou and Molinero, 2022).

These data appear relevant for this research, as it places rap music as one of the major musical genres in France, confirming the possibility for rappers to reach a wide audience. Moreover, the social division of rap audiences and its ethic-practical function highlight the social relevance of rap music. In addition, the insights of Eloy and Legon are also relevant to this research. They define an “ethic-practical” relationship of teenagers to rap music, filling up social, corporal, and moral functions (in Hammou and Molinero, 2022, pp. 124-15). The moral function looked for in rap music by a part of the audience could be filled up by political rap, such as studied in this research.

Table 1. Music genres listened to in 1997, 2008 and 2018 for 100 people listening to music in 1997, 2008 and 2018.

Music genre	**Declared frequent listening in 1997**	**Declared regular listening in 2008**	**Declared listening in 2018**
French variety	59	68	79
International variety	29	38	58
RnB	-		27
Electronic music, techno	-	15	22
Classical music	24	27	34
Pop, rock	13	28	48
World's music	14	25	34
Traditional music	-		24
Jazz	9	17	27
Hip-hop, rap	**5**	**14**	**30**
Metal, hard rock	4	7	14

source: Hammou and Molinero, 2022 (after 1997, 2008 and 2018 PCF surveys, Deps-doc, ministère de la Culture, 2022)

Table 2. Percentage of people listening to hip-hop and rap music among people listening to music in 1997, 2008 and 2018, categorised by age

Age	**1997**	**2008**	**2018**
15-24 years old	17	44	71
25-34 years old	3	21	55
35-44 years old	1	10	38
45-54 years old	1	5	16
55-64 years old	0	2	8
65+ years old	0	1	3

source: Hammou and Molinero, 2022 (after 1997, 2008 and 2018 PCF surveys, Deps-docs, ministère de la Culture, 2022)

Table 3. Percentage of people listening to rap music among people listening to music in 1997, 2008 and 2018, categorised by the socio-professional category of the head of the household

Socio-professional category of the head of the household	**1997**	**2008**	**2018**
Farmer	0	9	21
Independent	5	9	37
Executives (and similar)	7	9	33
Intermediary profession	4	12	39
Employee	6	15	34
Worker	7	18	47

source: Hammou and Molinero, 2022 (after 1997, 2008 and 2018 PCF surveys, Deps-docs, ministère de la Culture, 2022)

Chapter 6: Rappers as public historians

Introduction

The analysis of the YouTube comments section only takes into account the comments relating to the historical aspects of the songs. The comments can relate to historical events or periods mentioned in the song, and, of course, to the figures used by the artists. The analysis of YouTube comments, though it has downsides (see Sources and Methods), can already give an overall idea of how the audience receives historical references in rap music.

Three axes have been drawn from this analysis. In the first place, I show that the song, through the topic tackled, or the figure used, triggers feelings among the audience. Those feelings are mostly pride in belonging to a nation or having a certain identity (mentioned in the song, through a figure or relating to the artist's background). Moreover, quoting (punch)lines from the song also suggests an emotional reception, as the audience felt concerned enough by the line to quote it in the comments section. Finally, there is also a feeling of gratitude towards the artist, inspiring people that struggle with the issues depicted in the songs, and putting forward marginalised parts or figures of history.

In the second place, I show that dealing with these marginalised parts of history creates a space for discussion and explications about the cultural-historical knowledge drafted in the songs. Moreover, the figures are also sometimes used in comments, not as part of quotes but as triggering discussion (for example on recent events).

In the third place, I show how the audience elevates the artists as figures, by equating them to the leaders often mentioned in their songs, or by stressing the educational aspect of their songs, comparing them to teachers.

1. Emotional responses

As pieces of art, rap songs trigger feelings among their audience. For political rap more specifically, it seems that the range of feelings is quite wide, going from gratitude towards the rapper who denounces racism for example, to determination to not give up struggling for a more equal and fair society. Regarding the historical figures used in the studied songs, I found three major emotional reactions. The first one is the pride of one's identity, that the person will put forward. The second one is a more vague, emotional resonance with (punch)lines from the songs, that appear important for the person commenting. The third one is gratitude towards the artist for diffusing marginalised historical knowledge.

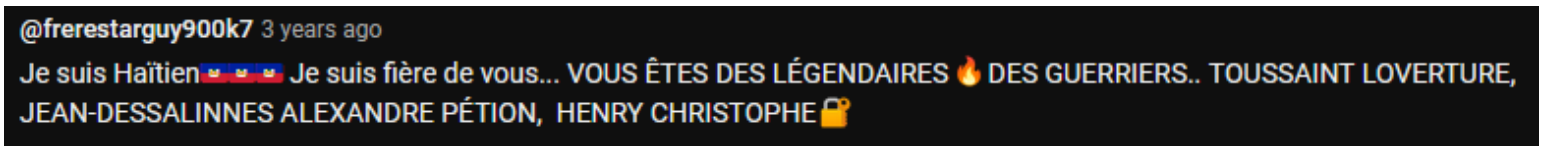
a) Pride in one's identity

The feeling of pride is often linked in the comments, to the attachment to a country or an identity (being Black, being Muslim). In different songs of the three artists, people stressed their belonging to a nation or a socio-cultural identity. As the songs are sometimes directly referring to countries in a positive light, which encourages people from these countries to claim their origin.

Moreover, it is often a way to create a link between the artist and themselves. For example, there are a lot of proud Haitian people displaying their identity in the comments of Kery James' songs, because the rapper is from Haiti. This also displays the pride of this audience to have this link to Kery James, an artist they admire and

sometimes hold as a hero (see 3.). The same goes for Médine, notably in the comments section of his song "Alger roi" (2017), where a lot of Algerian pride is displayed. Moreover, the fact that the rapper characterises Algiers as "the Mecca of revolutionaries" (after Amilcar Cabral's expression) encourages this pride and links it to Pan-African and anti-colonial issues.

Some comments also link the figures mentioned in the song to their own national background, showing pride in their common origin with the leaders. For example, this comment under the video clip of "Musique Nègre" (2016) (*Comment 1*):



Comment 1. "I am Haitian. I am proud of you... YOU ARE LEGENDARY, YOU ARE WARRIORS... TOUSSAINT LO[U]VERTURE, JEAN-DESSALINES, ALEXANDRE PETION, HENRY CHRISTOPHE".

Of all these names, only Toussaint Louverture is mentioned in the song. They are all considered "founding fathers" of Haiti, as they fought for the Haitian Revolution and led the country as emperor (Dessalines), king (Pétion) or president (Christophe). Therefore, this comment not only shows the pride in the "paternity" of a Haitian figure mentioned in the song, but it also adds to the historical knowledge by naming other similar figures (also see 2. b)). This pride linked to historical figures is also found in the comments of "Enfant du Destin (Ataï)" (2018) by Médine where a lot of people mention they are from New Caledonia and pay tribute to Ataï, naming him a "great warrior" (maniotya, 2019; vincentcernet2209, 2019), "great chief Ataï" (JustineKela, 2022; djobidjoba7637, 2019), or "a great man" (cagouproduction7029, 2019).

Moreover, a lot of comments refer to New Caledonia as "Kanaky", which is the name used by independentists since the 1970s. This suggests the rejection of the name given

to the islands by the explorer James Cook and kept by the French as they colonised it in the 1850s. In that regard, Médine's song revives the independentist struggle and reveals the tensions between New Caledonia and its former colonial administrator. Despite its autonomous status within the French system, New Caledonia is not fully independent and such a status can be understood as a continuity of the colonial system (as for other overseas territories, see Chapter 2).

Finally, the expression of an identity outside a nation or territory can also be observed. Black identity is mostly put forward, displaying solidarity between Black people from different countries. For example, this comment from "Musique Nègre" (2016) (*Comment 2*):

Comment 2. "Sick flow, I love it please keep it going it's never too late. All Black and united"

The context and claim of the song are contributing to creating an atmosphere of solidarity among Black people. This is even more true if they live in France, as the song denounces the racism of French society and opposes to it Black people's pride and their determination to fight. This idea of solidarity and unity of Black people is reminiscent of the Pan-African ideal, defended by most of the leaders mentioned by Médine, Kery James or Youssoupha. In that sense, the comments sections can be seen as a Pan-African "space" or "network", that rappers contributed to create.

"Black power" is also mentioned in the comments, reinforcing the idea of Black people fighting for their liberation (djdaya971, 2019). This places the audience in line with the fight of the artists, who are themselves in line with the leaders they mention in their

songs. This "chain" of struggles consequently reinforces the idea that many antiracist struggles are still playing today.

Rappers themselves put forward their multicultural identity (and more often the non-French part of it) in their songs. The audience can show their similar identity by repeating the line(s) displaying this. In a more general manner, the audience often quotes lines that resonate with them, showing a different form of emotional engagement.

b) Quoting of (punch)lines

Another way for audiences to emotionally engage with the song is to quote (punch)lines in the comments section. I consider this widely used practice as an emotional engagement because I think it is a way to show one's connection with the discourse of the rapper. Moreover, the selected lyrics will likely resonate specifically for the person who decides to note them down in the comments section, suggesting an emotional link. For example, in "Musique Nègre" (2016) by Kery James, Youssoupha claims in one of his verses: "Haiti, kingdom of Africa". This short line is widely repeated in the comments section, mainly by Haitian people, but also by people from different African countries. It is a way for both audiences to display their pride and acknowledgement of Haiti as the first Black Republic, created by (formerly) enslaved people (originating from Africa). Haiti is therefore a symbol of Black liberation, bringing together Black people from different countries.

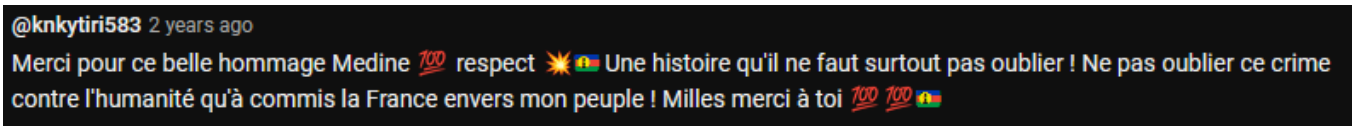
Similarly, in "Black Out" (2015) by Youssoupha, the shoutouts from the choruses are widely repeated in the comments. Each person seems to use the line that resonates best with them (Lumumba, Sankara, Cabral, Louverture). The most recurring name is

Toussaint Louverture, which can suggest that he is more known than the others, or that more Haitian people commented on this video. In that sense, the repetition of quotes from the song can show pride or admiration, both for the rapper who came up with the (punch)line or for the leader mentioned in it.

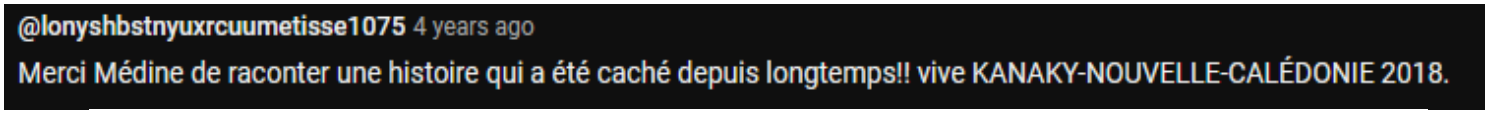
This practice shows a precise link between the artists' texts and the audience. Indeed, according to the lines quoted, it is possible to assess what part of the song resonated better with the audience. The fact that leaders' names are often repeated shows the audience's interest in History, which is closely related to a feeling of gratitude towards the rappers.

c) Gratitude towards the artists

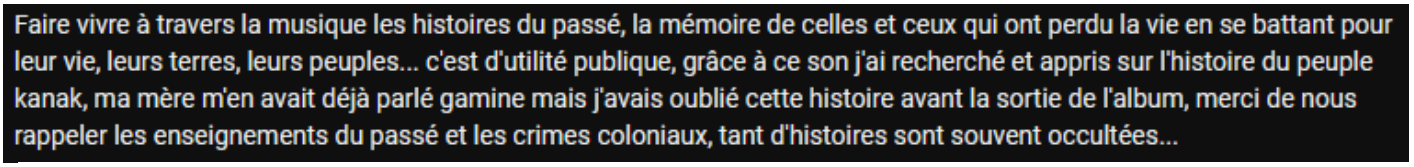
There is a recurring feeling of gratitude towards the rappers. It can be linked to the engagement of the rapper or the fact that he denounces social problems (such as racism). However, from a more historical perspective, the artist can be celebrated as putting forward marginalised historical people (and events). This is mainly seen in Médine's "Enfant du Destin", where numerous people thank him for the "tribute" he paid to Ataï or Kunta Kinté. For example, in the comments section of "Enfant du Destin (Ataï)" (2018) the following comments can be found (*Comments 3, 4 and 5*):



Comment 3. "Thanks for this beautiful tribute Médine. respect. This is a history/story that we should not forget! We shouldn't forget this crime against humanity that France committed towards my people! Many thanks to you."



Comment 4. "Thanks, Médine, to tell a story/history that has been hidden for so long!! Long live KANAKY NEW CALEDONIA 2018."



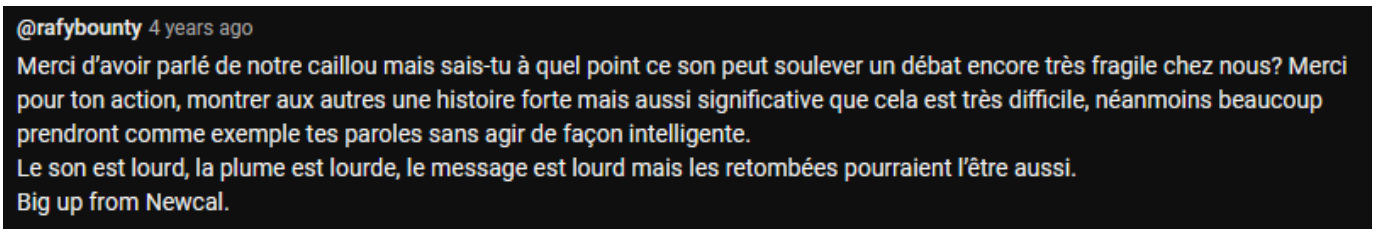
Comment 5. "Keeping alive stories of the past and the memory of those who died fighting for their lives, their lands, their people, through music... it's of public utility. Thanks to this song I researched and learnt about the history of the Kanak people, my mother already told me about that when I was younger, but I forgot about this story/history before the album came out. Thank you for reminding the lessons of the past and the colonial crimes, so many stories are often overlooked."

These comments suggest that this part of History, the story of Ataï and his people, has long been marginalised (forgotten or hidden) in France. Indeed, as it is part of colonial history and its violence, it was not put forward in the national narrative and is not taught in French schools. Thus, part of the audience is very grateful towards Médine for spreading the memory of this event and the name of Ataï, considering this song is of public interest.

For the song “Enfant du Destin (Kounta Kinté)” (2008), similar comments can be found, as well as one referring directly to the work of Médine as “*devoir de mémoire*” (bakathug1337, 2020). As this song deals with slavery, this characterisation can be linked to the developments around slavery as a crime against humanity and the memory work made around it in France. It also shows how a rap song can contribute

to this *devoir de mémoire* and be understood as such and in a positive way by the audience.

However, there is also some criticism towards the rapper's approach in "Enfant du Destin (Ataï)" (*Comment 6*):



Comment 6. "Thank you for talking about our rock [New Caledonia], *but do you know how much this song can trigger a debate still very touchy for us? Thank you for your action, for showing others a strong and significant history/story, but this can be very difficult. Nonetheless, some will take your speech as example, without acting with reason. The instrumental is sick, the writing is sick, the message is sick, but the consequences could be harsh. Big up from Newcal* [New Caledonia]*."*

The author of this comment seems concerned about the consequences that such a song could have. Moreover, the mention of this story as a "still very touchy" topic suggests that the colonial past is still present in New Caledonia and creates different and complex issues (for example on the question of independence from France).

This concern is voiced in another lengthy comment, which underlines the complex historical, political, and social situation of New Caledonia [35], claiming that it is "important to be properly educated" on these issues "before putting it into words" (djobidjoba7637, 2019). Other comments highlighted the inaccuracies in Médine's song but without further explanation of what is wrong (manax5171, 2022; dangioeuriboa1753, 2021). However, it seems that the rapper properly used the

[35] The comment for example stresses the complex political context of the time, where people of New Caledonia would answer a referendum about their independence (2018-2019).

historical material about Ataï and his death (see Chapter 3) and the majority of comments rather celebrate the accuracy of the song.

Therefore, the songs studied, and more specifically their antiracist and anti-colonial aspect triggers an emotional response from the audience, encouraging them to display their own marginalised identity with pride. Moreover, they also engage with the artists writing, repeating (punch)lines that resonate with them, sometimes enriching it with more leaders' names. Finally, the audience is usually grateful towards the artists who put forward a dissonant history, thus working towards the inscription of these leaders and events into the collective memory. In addition, the audience appears very aware of the historical role played by artists and does not hesitate to enrich or discuss the historical-cultural knowledge they pass on. In that sense, the audience has an active role in the construction of dissonant memory.

2. Circulation of knowledge

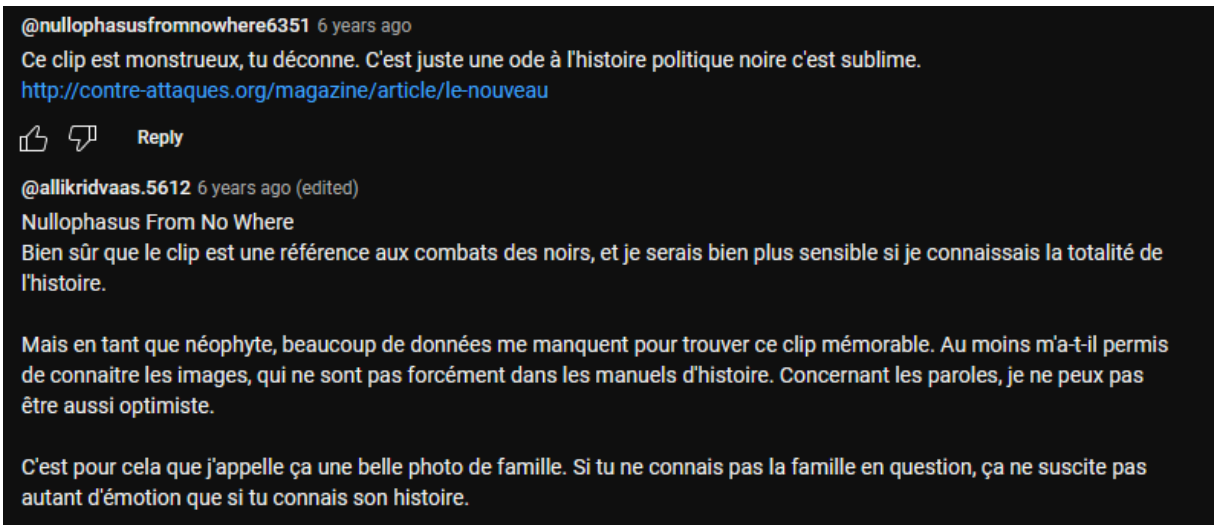
The historical-cultural knowledge that rappers transmit through their songs is most of the time happily received by their audience. Often in political rap, the lyrics are more important than the instrumental, which translates an ethical function of rap music. It denounces injustices or passes on knowledge. In a word, it is meaningful. In addition to receiving knowledge, the comments section shows that the audience enriches, completes, or discusses that knowledge. This can be done concerning the events or historical context mentioned in the songs, or through the use of the figures mentioned.

a) Cultural-historical knowledge

A part of the historical knowledge is passed on in the comments section by completing themes tackled in the songs. For example, external references can be mentioned to

deepen the mentions of the song. With "Alger Roi" (2017), several comments suggest watching the documentary *Alger, la Mecque des révolutionnaires* ("Algiers, Mecca of revolutionaries"), available on YouTube (nabilamnezia9039, 2018; chaimalas1218, 2018). This directly echoes the theme of the song, in which Médine uses the words of Amilcar Cabral "The revolutionaries have Algiers" (see Chapter 3). Similarly, with "Enfant du Destin (Kounta Kinté)" (2008), comments mention *Roots: The Saga of an American Family,* the book by Haley from which the song is inspired, as well as the series *Roots* created after the book[36] (VFawkesG, 2014; sotiriosamarchalazonitis945, 2019). In both cases, these people offer the rest of the audience the possibility to expand or complete the historical knowledge of the song.

Another interesting comment comes from "Musique Nègre" (2016) (*Comments 7 and 8*):



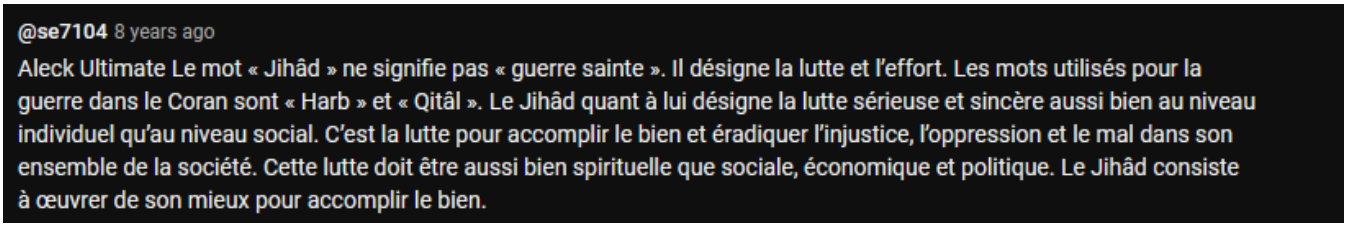
Comment 7. "You're kidding, this clip is amazing. It is an ode to Black political history, it's beautiful. [link]*"*

Comment 8. "Of course, the clip is a reference to Black people's struggles, and I would be way more sensible to it if I knew the whole history. But as a neophyte, I miss a lot of data to find this video clip memorable. At least it made me discover pictures that are not always in schoolbooks. I cannot say the same about the lyrics. That's why I'm calling it a nice family picture. If you don't know the family, it does not trigger as much emotions as if you knew about its history."

[36] Haley's book has been adapted in a series format several times. It seems that the adaptation dealt with here is the one from 2016.

The first comment is a reaction to another person saying they are deceived by the video clip. To object to that statement, the person shares the link to a website article explaining the numerous references present in the video clip. This can consequently help people who did not at first understand all of them to enrich their knowledge about the history of Black struggles. The second comment shows how necessary it is, as a lot of images used in the video clip are not well-known. The comment links this ignorance to gaps in school programmes, which is a recurrent critique in the comments sections of these three artists (see 3.). This conversation, allowed by the "reply" option in YouTube comments, shows the creation of a fan network, where people share their opinions and knowledge relating to the song.

The knowledge circulating in the comments section is not only historical but also cultural. For example, in "Speaker Corner" (2015), Médine claims "I am calling for social *jihâd*". This line is questioned in the comments section, as "*jihâd*" usually has a negative connotation in French because it is linked to Islamist terrorism. Comments then explain the meaning of the word "*jihâd*", mentioning that its use in Western media as synonymous with terrorism is biased. One example can be found in *Comment 9*:



*Comment 9. "The word "*jihâd*" does not mean "holy war". It designates struggle and effort. The words used in the Quran for war are "*harb*" and "*qitâl*". Jihâd means a serious and sincere struggle, both at individual and social levels. It is a struggle to achieve good things and eradicate injustice, oppression and evil in society. This struggle must be spiritual, social, economic, and political. Jihâd implies you work your best to achieve what is right/good."*

The evolution of the meanings behind the term "*jihâd*" is complex. However, it indeed includes different aspects of life, not only a spiritual one. The term is often to be

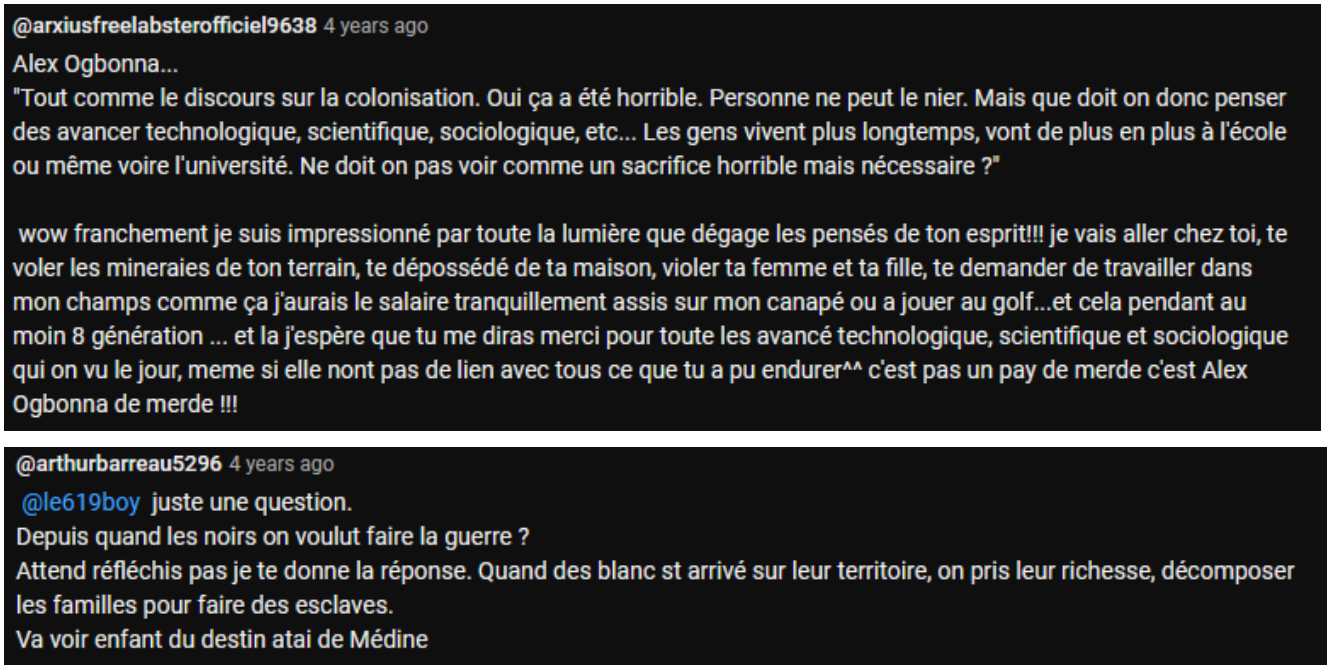
understood as a fight within oneself, as Médine's second album illustrates (named *Jihad: le plus grand combat est contre soi-même – Jihad: the greatest fight is within yourself*, 2005).

Similarly, in "Musique Nègre" (2016), some verses are in Haitian Creole (rapped by Kery James) or in Lingala (rapped by Youssoupha). These extracts lead to discussion and knowledge transmission, as some people did not know what language it was. Moreover, it could also expand beyond a simple answer, as some comments explain how Haitian Creole was created (born out of a mix between local languages and French, the coloniser's language) (roseu.m8664, 2018; ayitiayiti6362, 2018). This type of explanation requires both historical and cultural knowledge, enriching others' understanding of French colonisation and its multiple consequences.

It is also interesting to notice non-francophone audiences in the comments section. More importantly, the themes of the songs are explained to them, allowing rappers' art to transcend language barriers. Moreover, as the themes are often related to racism or (neo) colonisation, it also contributes to internationally spread knowledge about the French colonial past and its remains.

All these aspects show how much discussion is going on about the historical-cultural content of the songs. Some longer discussions (for example on neo-colonisation) can also be found, including some racist answers, or showing the persistence of the discourse on the "good effects" of French colonisation (see Chapter 2). This can be seen in *Comments 10 and 11*. Here, the idea that French colonisation was a "terrible but necessary sacrifice" is repeated to defend a vision of European civilisation as superior and the ultimate goal for African countries. This also defends a linear vision of History as always going towards progress. It shows that several years after the 2005 law on

"the positive role of colonisation" (see Chapter 2), this idea is still present in French society, even among younger generations.



Comment 10. "'Just like the discourse on colonisation. Yes, it was horrible. No one cand deny it. But what do we think about the technological, scientific, sociological, etc., progress? People live longer, go more and more to school or even to university. Shouldn't we see that [colonisation] *as a terrible but necessary sacrifice?'* [this is a quote out of a previous comment]
Wow, really, I am impressed by all the enlightenment of your thought!!! I'm going to go to your place, steal the minerals of your field, take your home, rape your wife and daughter, ask you to work in my field so I'll earn money just being on my couch or playing golf… and that for at least eight generations… and then I hope you'll thank me for all the technological, scientific and sociological progress that were created, even though it doesn't have anything to do with what you went through ^^ It's not a shitty country [reference to the song they are commenting, "PDM" by Kery James, meaning "Pays de Merde" or "Shitty Country"], *it's shitty* [username]*!!!"*

Comment 11. "[username] just a question. Since when did Black people want to go to war? Wait, no need to think about it, I'll give you the answer. When White people arrived on their territory, took their resources, and torn their families apart to enslave them. Go listen to "Enfant du Destin (Ataï)" by Médine"

If the answers are simplistic, they can at least show that the violence of colonisation is also known. This kind of discussion effectively shows both the dominant and dissonant memories of French history, mainly relating to colonialism. Moreover, the reference to "Enfant du Destin (Ataï)" (2018) by Médine shows how rap songs can play a role in the understanding of the colonial past and slavery among rap audiences. This

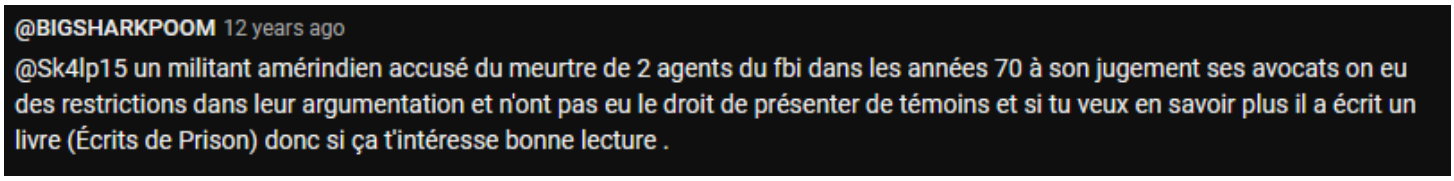
consideration refers directly to Médine's slogan, "*Le savoir est une arme*" ("Knowledge is a weapon"), which explains his ambition to transfer (historical) knowledge to his audience through his songs. Indeed, he believes that knowledge is a way to fight against oppressive ideologies that stem from ignorance.

Thus, the audience participates in building knowledge about the French colonial past and memories through the comments section. This is a behaviour identified by Staiger (2005) as a "purposeful consumption", showing that audiences are actively involved in making knowledge circulate. Indeed, they also propose further knowledge about the leaders mentioned by the artists.

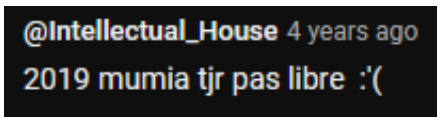
b) Knowledge around the figures

Beyond more general historical knowledge, the leaders mentioned by the rappers also play a role in the circulation of knowledge. A common type of comment is relating to the speech extracts used by the artists in their songs. Some people ask for the reference of the speech, wondering who is talking. The answers can be very succinct (mentioning only the name of the leader) but can also lead to more explanation, such as the name of the speech or the document from which it comes. For example, in "Self Defense" (2008), Médine uses different speech extracts, one of them from Spike Lee's movie *Malcolm X* (1993). One comment mentions this source, eventually allowing people to know about this movie retracing the life of Malcolm X (perebeatnik6442, 2015). Similarly, some comments help identify the figures used in the video clips (chepakwametrecchiant, 2013; KMC9251, 2019; kathleendelcourt8136, 2018; djangogotu1895, 2020). They can come from archive footage, such as in the video clip of "Self Defense" (2008) or be reproduced by the rappers, such as in "Musique Nègre" (2016).

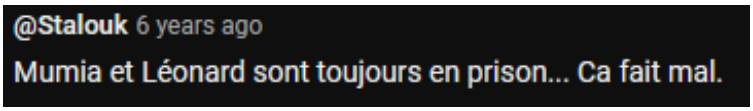
More information on less-known figures such as Mumia and Peltier mentioned in "Self Defense" (2008) can also be found in the comments. For example, the following comment explains who Peltier was. The person also mentions the book written by Peltier as a complementary reference (*Comment 12*). Moreover, the audience sometimes reacts to the mention of figures in line with current events. This is for example the case for Mumia and Peltier, as Médine claims in "Self Defense" (2008) "Free Mumia and Leonard Peltier" (*Comments 13 and 14*).



*Comment 12. "A Native-American activist accused of the murder of two FBI agents in the 1970s. During his trial, his lawyers have been restricted in their plead and were not authorised to present witnesses. If you want to know more about it, he wrote a book (*Prison Writings: My Life Is My Sun Dance*), so if you are interested, have a good read."*



Comment 13. "2019 Mumia [is] still not free"

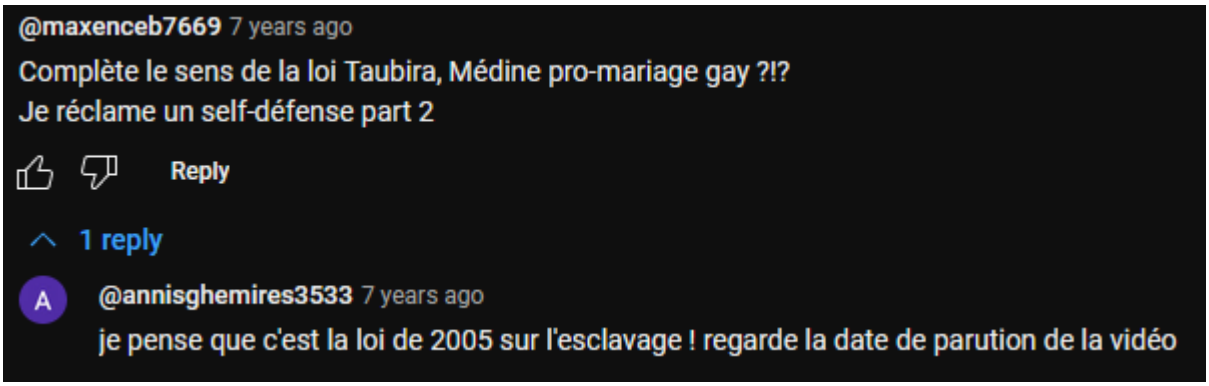


Comment 14. "Mumia and Leonard are still in prison... it hurts" [posted in 2017]

This link between the audience's temporality and the song's temporality can also be found in the comments section of "Fly" (2011), by Youssoupha. In this song, the rapper mentions Mandela, who passed away in 2013. Some comments pay tribute to this leader, quoting Youssoupha's line (karamokopapissoumahoro3477, 2019; ssed8008, 2014). These comments show the commitment of part of the audience to the recent

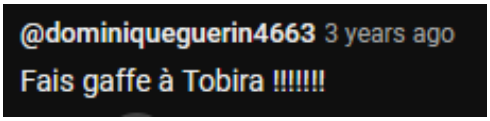
developments in the life of the leaders. This comes under memory activism, showing how the rappers not only pass on names and events but also the fights of the figures.

Finally, some figures are controversial. This is illustrated by the reactions to the mention of Taubira Kery James or Médine (*Comments 15, 16 and 17*).



Comment 15. "Complete the meaning of the Taubira law, Médine pro-gray marriage?!? I want a Self Defense part 2"

Comment 16. "I think it is the 2005 law on slavery! Look at the publication date of the video"



Comment 17. "Watch out for T[au]bira!!!!!!"

The first comment refers to the other law known as the "Taubira law", which is the law authorizing same-sex marriage, passed in 2012. Taubira was an important contributor in the passing of this law, hence it took her name. The first person commenting seems to be surprised that Médine would refer to it as if it would be astonishing that the rapper would support gay marriage. The answer is partly wrong, as the reference Médine uses is indeed the law defining slavery as a crime against humanity, but it was passed in 2001 and not 2005 (see Chapter 2). Moreover, this comment and its answer show how audiences sometimes do not reflect on the temporality of the song, as "Self Defense" was released in 2008.

The second comment rather seems angry that Kery James refers to Taubira in "Le retour du rap français" (2009). I interpret this comment as "watch out when referring to Taubira", in the sense that Kery James should not hold her as an important figure. As this comment does not have any further development or answer, I can only suppose that this person (who posted the comment in 2020) thinks more of Taubira as the deputy who helped gay marriage than as the one who contributed to the recognition of slavery as a crime against humanity. However, the lyrics surrounding her name in the song are quite clearly referring to memory and history ("My rap is African because my rap has a memory / I am like Madame Taubira I aspire to know our history").

This section showed how knowledge circulates from the rappers' texts to the audience, and between the audience, thanks to the comments section. It appears that the comments section encourages the audience to share their knowledge, sometimes in detail or with references. Discussions also emerge, showing different opinions and echoing either the dominant memory or a dissonant one. This also concerns the figures mentioned by the rappers, as some of them are less well-known.

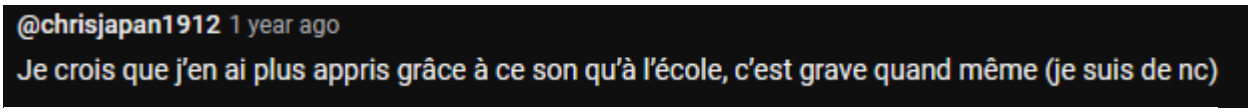
Moreover, in line with Staiger's work (2005), it shows the creation of a "fan's network", here dedicated to explanations or discussions on the historical-cultural content of the songs. This approach anchors the rappers' work in public history as they act as knowledge transmitters, triggering questions and discussions among their audience and eventually leading them to deeper research. This role assumed by the artists also leads part of the audience to consider them as authority figures, both in terms of knowledge and struggle.

3. Artists becoming figures

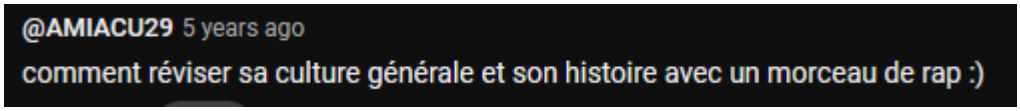
This role of knowledge transmitter is felt by the audience, who sometimes sees rappers as figures or leaders themselves. The artists are referred to as "teachers" or are put on the same level as the leaders they mentioned. This shows the role of rap music in educating the public, as well as their contribution to the collective memory. It also demonstrates the dissonance of such collective memory, as it is coupled with a critique of the school system. On the other hand, the fact that the audience equates the figures and the rappers show the prominent place given to the artists in conveying this memory. In addition, it shows the central place of the artists in social struggles.

a) Rapper-teachers

The role of rappers as knowledge transmitters is echoed in the way the audience describes the artists as teachers. This is mostly visible for Médine, who is often characterised as a "history teacher" (anto8616, 2019; williammary2345, 2020; amark4775, 2019) or even as a "future Minister of Culture" (lavidur75, 2019). As such, he "teaches" his audience marginalised parts of history. This leads some people to mention how much they learnt, thanks to the rapper (*Comments 18 and 19*):



Comment 18. "I think I learnt more thanks to this song than in school, that is quite problematic (I'm from New-Caledonia)" [from "Enfant du Destin (Atai)"]



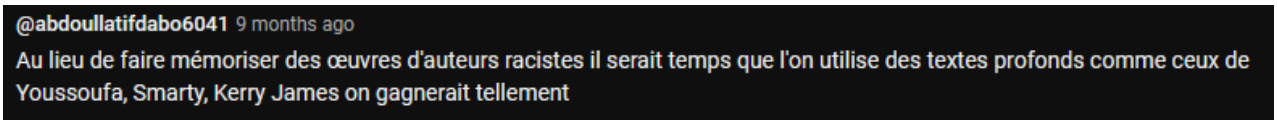
Comment 19. "How to review your general culture and your history with a rap song :)"

This is often coupled with gratitude (as shown in 1. c)), as the rapper-teacher contributes to a better understanding of or a different perspective on the topics

tackled. Moreover, the second comment (from "Musique Nègre" (2016) by Kery James") shows that the rappers not only transmit historical knowledge but also cultural knowledge, confirming the circulation of this double knowledge argued in 2. a).

The didactic aspect of rap music can be analysed in light of Andrews' work on the Black supplementary school movement in Britain. Born in the 1970s, this movement seeks to challenge the racism Black children face in the mainstream school system. For Andrews, this grassroots movement is part of "a Black radical critique of schooling", arguing that the school system is "inherently racist" and consequently requires "Black independent spaces of education" (Andrews, 2014, p. 5). Thus, a parallel can be drawn between the Black supplementary school system and the fact that rappers transmit marginalised knowledge through their songs. The fact that the audience in turn considers rappers as teachers stresses this parallel. Thus, it can be argued that spaces of "Black independent education" are emerging in the comments sections of such songs. Moreover, it is not only confined to Black education, as it also includes other minorities (for example Muslim people or Native peoples).

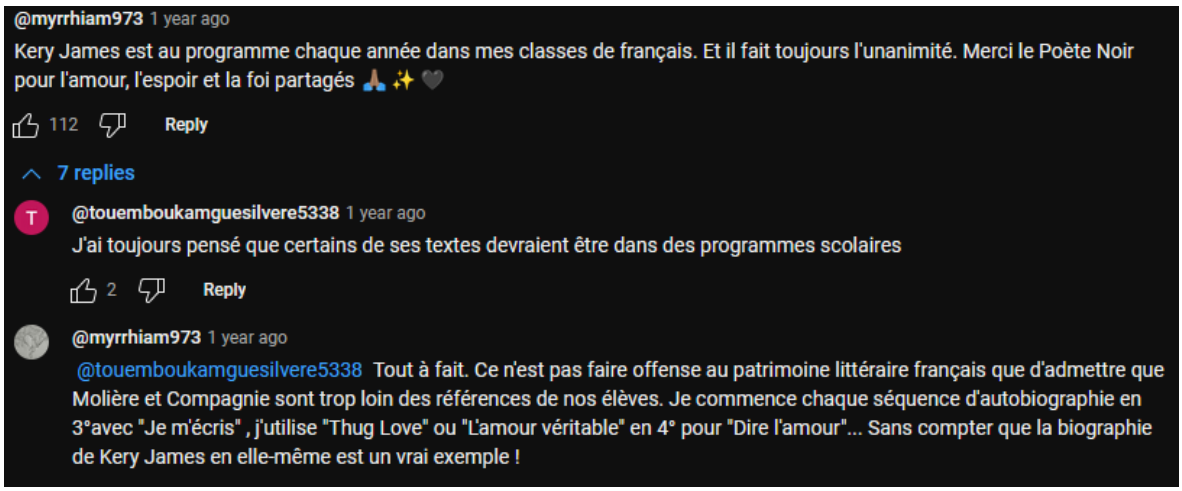
The creation of such spaces, emphasised by the figure of the rapper-teacher, also raises criticism about the French school system (that leaves aside a large part of colonial history) or about the material studied in class. Indeed, many comments underline how problematic it is that some figures or events are not taught at all, even though they are linked with France's history (chrisjapan1912, 2022; boulaboula4102, 2019; Aleck_Ultimate, 2015; eugspit, 2015). In that regard, the audience joins the rappers in their criticism of the French school system and the teaching of History (also see Chapter 2). The material is also criticised as being the product of "racist authors" (*Comment 20*):



Comment 20. "Instead of memorising works of racist authors, it's about time we use meaningful texts such as the ones by Youssou[ph]a, Smarty, Kery James, we would earn so much."

This comment shows how the references used in French programmes can be considered problematic by some students, specifically if they have an immigrant background. It also shows how the French school system lacks self-criticism and reconsideration of its references.

However, some teachers seem to already use rap texts for their classes, as shown in these comments (*Comments 21, 22 and 23*):



Comment 21. "Kery James is part of the programme each year in my French (literature) course. And he is always unanimously appreciated. Thanks to the Black poet for the shared love, hope and faith."

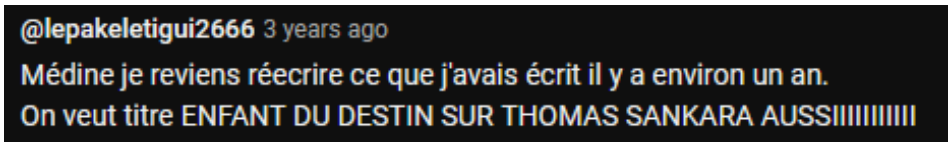
Comment 22. "I always thought some of his texts should be in school programmes"

Comment 23. "Absolutely. It is not an offense to French literary heritage to admit that Moliere and co and to far from our pupils' references. I start each course about autobiography in 9th grade with "Je m'écris", I use "Thug Love" of "L'amour veritable" in 8th grade for [the theme] "Telling love"... Moreover, Kery James' biography itself is a useful example!"

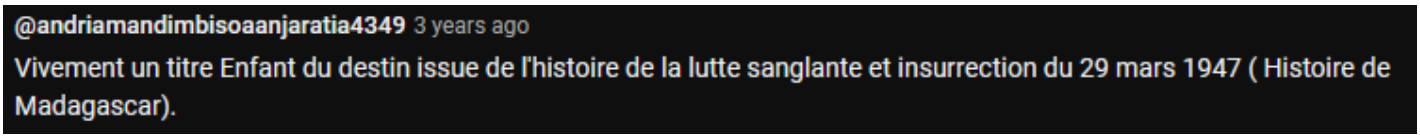
It demonstrates how rappers' texts are not only useful to transmit (historical) knowledge but are also pieces of literature and can be studied as such. The inclusion of rap texts in school programmes is a recurring debate, as many comments stressed how

some texts should be studied in school (rahimchilla2551, 2022; kevincarnaille3685, 2022; user-nc8zd2rf8o, 2023). As a matter of fact, one of Médine’s songs was included in a history schoolbook. It is the song “17 Octobre” (2006), where the rapper evokes the massacre of peaceful Algerian protestors in Paris on the 17th of October 1961. The rapper nuanced this recognition, stressing the flaws of the school system which, according to him, does not make enough efforts to interest students (and more specifically younger people) (Ballast, 2015).

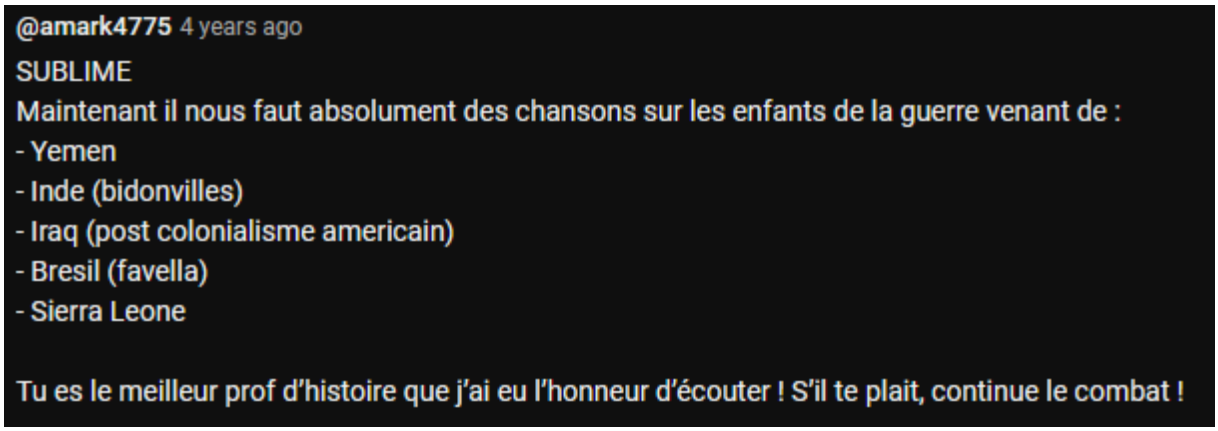
As rappers are seen as teachers, some people demand more songs on different historical events or figures. For example, Médine’s “Enfant du Destin” series is very popular and leads to many suggestions (*Comments 24, 25 and 26*):



Comment 24. "Médine I repeat what I wrote about a year ago. We want a title "ENFANT DU DESTIN" ABOUT THOMAS SANKARA TOO"



Comment 25. “I hope there will soon be a title "Enfant du Destin" about the story of the bloody fight and insurrection of the 29th March 1947 (History of Madagascar).”



Comment 26. "BEAUTIFUL". Now we absolutely need songs on the children of war coming from:
- Yemen
- India (slums)
- Iraq (American post-colonialism)
- Brazil ([favelas])
- Sierra Leone
You are the best history teacher I had the honour to listen to! Please keep on fighting!"

These suggestions show an interest in Médine's writing and his way to tell History. The mention of Sankara and the insurrection of Madagascar show the interest in stories of resistance to (French) colonialism, which are not taught in schools. Moreover, these demands should be understood as a taste for Médine's music as well. Indeed, even though texts have an important place in his art, they are always coupled with music. This also shows a different way to learn about dissonant history and memories.

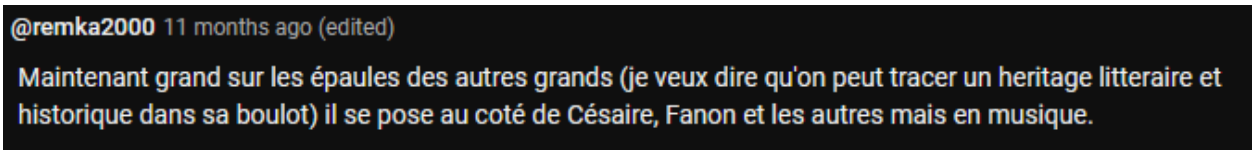
The third comment seems more interested in current inequalities, which is also a recurring theme in the series "Enfant du Destin". The mention of "American post-colonialism" in Iraq probably refers to the US invasion of the country in the aftermath of the 11th of September 2001 (and should rather be termed "neo-colonialism"). In that regard, it reveals an awareness of neo-colonialist policies, showing the transformation of colonial practices.

Therefore, rappers are considered as teachers by a large part of the audience, because they contribute or open them to historical knowledge. As such, rappers have a certain

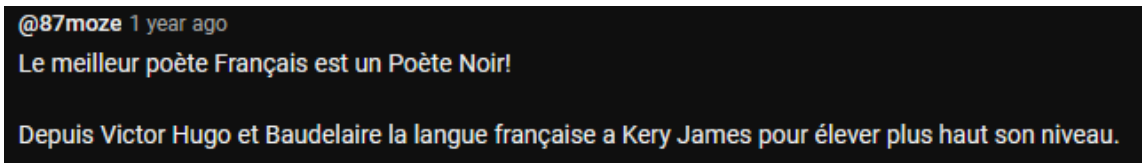
authority and the audience expects them to make research on the topic they tackle in their songs. This displays the flaws of the school system, that rappers contribute to "fix" by creating educational spaces. Beyond the figure of the teacher, rappers can also be equated to the leaders they mention in their music, thus embodying authority in social struggles.

b) Rapper-leaders

As seen in Chapter 4, rappers create a link between them and the figures they mention, as a way to show that they continue their struggle, through rap music. The audience is also creating this link, but more clearly elevating the rappers on the same level as the leaders. For example, Kery James is often compared or equated to Toussaint Louverture ("Toussaint Louverture, Jr!!!" – mariefrancetelfort3484, 2019) or Malcolm X ("The French Malcolm X" – jeremymatho3593, 2020). Moreover, his talent as a writer leads to comparison with other great writers (*Comments 27 and 28*):



Comment 27. "Now, a great man on the shoulders of other great men (I mean we can trace a literary and historical heritage in his work), he stands next to Césaire, Fanon and the others, but musically."

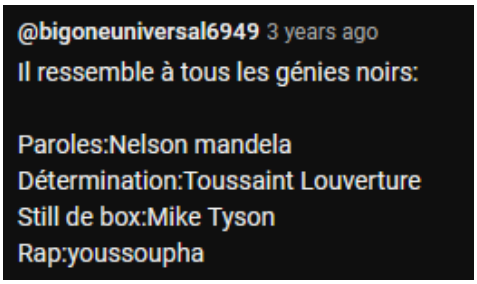


Comment 28. "The best French poet is a Black poet! After Victor Hugo and Baudelaire, the French language has Kery James to push it to its highest level."

With these two comments, Kery James is compared to the Black figures he refers to in his music, but also to French figures present in the national narrative as representing French culture and literature. This shows in the first place the diversity of Kery James'

audience, as they use their own greatest references to display their admiration for the rapper’s work. At the same time, it shows how Kery James aligns his art with a multicultural background, also perceived by his audience.

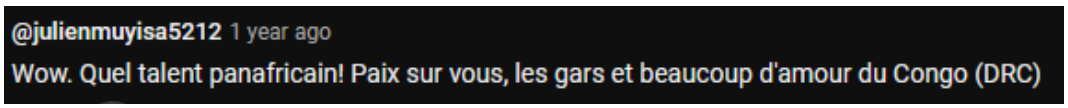
Moreover, he is associated with “Black geniuses” from different fields (*Comment 29*):



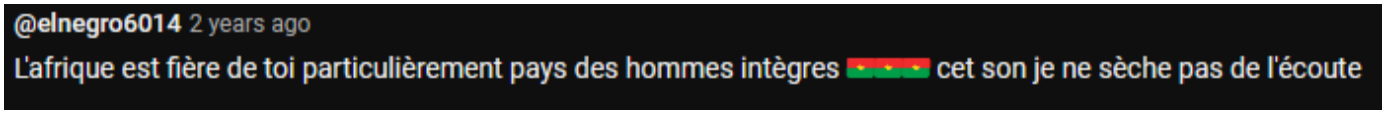
Comment 29. "He looks like all Black geniuses:
Lyrics: Nelson Mandela
Determination: Toussaint Louverture
Boxing style: Mike Tyson
Rap: Youssoupha”

These comparisons show that Kery James is considered a major figure in Black culture. Once again, he is linked with Toussaint Louverture, reminding his Haitian origin. Moreover, the comparison with Youssoupha as a great rapper shows that these two artists are both held as important figures, for their music, their social struggle, and their contribution to Black culture.

Indeed, Youssoupha is also celebrated as an important figure. Some comments relate him to a Pan-African icon, therefore stressing his alignment with Lumumba (also from Congo/DRC) or Sankara (*Comments 30 and 31*):



Comment 30. "Wow. What a Pan-African talent! Peace on you guys, much love from Congo (DRC)"



Comment 31. "Africa is proud of you, specifically [the] country of honest men. I can't [stop] listening to [this] song"

The first comment is from "Histoires Vraies" (2011), which features Youssoupha and Corneille, a singer of Rwandan origin, popular in France. Their collaboration on this song evokes for this person a Pan-African reunion, where the talent of both artists shines. This comparison demonstrates the vivid heritage of Pan-African thinkers in the 21st century.

The second comment (from "Gospel" (2021), by Youssoupha) shows a dialogue with the lyrics of the song, where Youssoupha claims "Sankara pray for me, so I become an honest man" (see Chapter 5). The author stresses how proud he is of the rapper. This pride can come from the success of Youssoupha, a recognised artist. Moreover, it can come from the numerous mentions and references the rappers makes about the African continent, thus contributing to putting African figures and culture forward in the French cultural landscape. Moreover, as the person behind this comment seems to be from Burkina Faso, it can also be understood as a way to show Youssoupha that he is already an "honest man" for part of his audience, trying to dissipate his doubts. In that regard, the audience celebrates him as an heir of Sankara and his struggle.

Similarly, in "Alger Roi" (2017), the audience establishes a dialogue with the song lyrics, as Médine claims in the chorus:

> *"Les chrétiens ont le Vatican*
> *Les révolutionnaires ont Alger*
> *La Mecque c'est pour les musulmans*
> *Les révolutionnaires ont Alger*
> *Les juifs ont les 10 commandements*
> *Les révolutionnaires ont Alger*
> *Le 93 a ses bâtiments*
> *Les révolutionnaires ont Alger"*
>
> "The Christians have the Vatican
> The revolutionaries have Algiers
> Mecca is for the Muslims
> The revolutionaries have Algiers
> The Jews have the 10 Commandments

> The revolutionaries have Algiers
> The 93[37] has its buildings
> The revolutionaries have Algiers"

In the comments, the sentence "The revolutionaries have Algiers" is often repeated, but some people also use the structure of the sentence to pass their own message. In that regard, they repeat the structure of the song, claiming "The revolutionaries have Algiers, the DZ have Médine" (yanisabed9910, 2018). DZ is an abbreviation to designate Algeria or the Algerian people, from the Arabic name of the country, الجزائر(*al-Jazā'ir*)[38]. With this type of comment, the audience identifies Médine as an important Algerian (or Franco-Algerian) figure, a sort of leader for the historical and memorial struggle surrounding the relationship between Algeria and France.

This recurring association of the rappers with figures they look up to shows how the audience anchors them in the imagery of a struggle, represented by their political rap and their social engagement. Therefore, rappers are held as both teaching and liberating figures. The historical and memorial aspect of their songs is well received by the large majority of the audience, who recognise the didactic role of such rap music. In addition, the audience also links rappers to the leaders figures they use in their songs. This shows that the rappers' alignment with these figures is taken up by the audience, giving legitimacy to this "heritage".

[37] 93 is the number of the French department of Seine-Saint-Denis. It is located in the Parisian suburban area and is part of the *banlieues* as there is a lot of social housing and poverty.

[38] Also related to the Algerian Arabicدزاير (*Dzayer*) or الجزاير (*Djazaïr*) and the Tamazight ⵣⵣⴰⵢⴻⵔ (*Dzayer*).

Conclusion

The analysis of the YouTube comments section gives an idea of how the audience receives the historical and memorial content of the songs studied. In this chapter, I have shown, in the first place, that the rappers' songs trigger a positive emotional response. Mainly pride and gratitude can be found in comments, showing how the audience sees the artists' historical and memorial approach as a way to put forward identities usually marginalised in France (or in French history). Moreover, the gratitude expressed towards artists who spread knowledge on overlooked parts of French (colonial) history and memory works as a criticism of the French national narrative, that selects the parts of history put forward. Therefore, rappers appear as transmitters of knowledge, but they also stimulate discussions and knowledge transmission between audiences, thanks to the comments section. In that regard, the comments section can be linked to "fan networks" (Staiger, 2005) where the audience exchanges knowledge and sources.

The creation of such networks shows that rappers are public historians, disseminating a dissonant history and memory through their art. In line with this consideration, rappers are seen as leaders by their audience, notably as teaching figures. They are often considered history teachers, which shows the outreach of their texts, but also highlights the deficiency of history classes in France. It confirms that French colonial history is barely taught in schools and points out the necessity to better understand this part of French history to address contemporary issues. It also highlights the need for a *devoir de mémoire,* which rappers convey. Indeed, rappers place themselves in the heritage of the leaders' fights, showing how anti-colonial or antiracist struggles are still

plating today (as shown in Chapter 4). The audience takes up this path, as they also establish a link between rappers and leaders, making the artists leaders themselves.

The reception of Médine, Youssoupha and Kery James' texts by their audience thus makes obvious the contribution of rappers to the memorial and historical discussion on the French colonial past. The artists and audience's inputs are consequently embedded in a wider, national frame. Indeed, as seen in Chapter 2, memorial issues surrounding the colonial past are a recurring topic of public debate in France. To determine to what extent the dissonant memories put forward by rappers penetrate the public debate, the next chapters will analyse press sources. These are also valuable because they offer the possibility to reach non-target audiences (*i.e.,* people who do not listen to the artists' music or rap in general).

Chapter 7: Ambivalent reception in press sources

Introduction

The press sources analysed show a differentiated treatment of rappers, depending on the type of press. Indeed, it appears that the generalist press (here *Le Monde* and *Liberation*) is more oriented towards the controversies surrounding the rappers and the imagery of rap music as a product of the *banlieues*. On the contrary, specialised press sources tend to pay more attention to the content of the texts and the approach of the rappers, therefore dealing more deeply with historical and memorial issues. A presentation of the newspapers and online press used in this chapter has been drawn in the Sources and Methods part (see pp. 18-20).

1. Incomplete reception in generalist press

The generalist press does not have a lot of articles on the content of rap songs. The themes tackled by journalists are more general to the genre, as they mention the *banlieues*, religion (mainly Islam) or the controversies in which many rappers were taken. The themes of the political and social engagement of the artists and the historical aspects of their songs however emerge. Nevertheless, they are treated as separate themes and are not thought of as complementary in the rappers' careers.

a) Political and social engagement

For the three rappers studied, political and social engagement is a crucial part of their careers. The journalists usually come back through one or two sentences, to the artist's involvement in political and social issues. This is notable in articles about Kery James, who is a long-lasting figure on the French rap scene. These articles often mention his long career, as well as his specific story. It seems that the life of Kery James is an object

of fascination: a young, hardcore rapper from the Parisian *banlieue*, involved in illicit activities, who converted to Islam and decided to use his rap to encourage youngsters out of criminality after the death of one of his friends in a gang conflict. This unusual life path is repeated in every article found about the rapper. It also includes a discussion on the role of rap music, which, for Kery James, must be politically engaged. In that regard, he criticises "commercial" rappers, who "brag about having a lot of money and promote self-destruction" (in Goldszal, 2018). The rap of Kery James is described as a "moralising activism" (Binet, 2020), allowing him to "warn youngsters against the traps of drug trafficking or encourage[ing] them to have a critical perspective towards media" (Binet, 2013).

The criticism of media does not seem to always be well received. In a 2017 article, the journalist describes with a condescending eye Kery James' initiative to launch a news website dedicated to educating and informing people from the banlieues (and specifically young people) on the programmes and candidates for the 2017 presidential election (Renault, 2017). Kery James explains that, according to him, "there is an obvious link between media and the political class on way too many issues" and consequently "journalists don't have the means to properly do their job anymore" (in Renault, 2017). This quotation is repeated as a headline in the article but modified as "Media are not doing their job properly anymore", which is different from what the rapper said. It appears as a dishonest quotation emphasising the so-called "bad job" of journalists, while Kery James was criticising the political class and media CEOs (not journalists as individuals). This contributes to the negative image of rap music and rappers given by the generalist press. Moreover, the journalist ends the article by noting that a similar initiative was launched in 2013 by the rap group La Rumeur, with

very little success. This suggests that such an initiative is not thought through and is not to be taken seriously. In turn, it contributes to displaying rappers as rather insignificant actors in society. It is in line with the common media treatment of rap and rappers, as shown by Hammou (2014).

However, other articles show in a positive light the engagement of the artists. For example, a 2017 article in *Le Monde* stresses how the French rap scene is "alerting" on Rohingyas' situation for several years. The article is written in the context of the massive immigration of the Muslim minority from Myanmar (where they are persecuted for their faith) to Bangladesh. The short article doubled with a short video, explaining how rappers such as Médine, Kery James or Nekfeu already voiced concerns about the Rohingyas, at a time where French media were not dealing with this topic (Bettinelli, 2017). This shows that rappers are sometimes raising awareness on topics that are not yet in the public debate, consequently contributing to it by raising new issues.

This idea is also found in a 2018 article in *Libération* about the new collaboration between Médine, Youssoupha and Kery James, the song "PLMV" (meaning "*Pas la même vie*" – "Not the same life"). As it denounces the inequalities of French society, the journalist characterises the artists as "megaphones for priority districts through music and social action" (Bampély, 2018). The journalist also mentions how the rappers "often tackled in their texts themes that opened spaces of debates and controversies in French society, such as Islam, secularism or postcolonial immigration" (Bampély, 2018). The author stresses the role of rap music, and specifically of these rappers, to create discussion in the public realm. However, it seems that the "controversies" are mostly at the expense of the rappers and entail a public discussion that will reinforce

Islamophobia and far-right ideologies. For example, Médine was accused by several politicians to belong to a radical branch of Islam and was even targeted by a fascist organization.

Moreover, the author of the article does not give further details or instances on which rappers would have opened the debate. Providing further information about it or referring to other articles would have helped to solidly state their contribution to the public debate. In addition, it could have been worth citing some of the songs tackling these themes, to show the concrete link between rappers' music/lyrics and engagement. Thus, it seems that even though rappers are trying to put into question different social issues, it is not specifically put forward by the generalist press. Missing the link between the rappers' social and political engagement and the historical content of their texts shows the disinterest of some media in rap music and its social role. Indeed, the historical and/or memorial aspect of rap is not very discussed and is not used to point out related issues.

b) Historical perspectives

Some articles emphasise historical and memorial issues dealt with by the rappers. For example, a 2012 article in *Le Monde* introduces different rappers through their relationship with Algeria and the Algerian War of Independence on the occasion of a concert organised for the 50th anniversary of Algerian Independence (Binet, 2012). Though this article shows the difficult memory of this war and how rappers experience it, it does not provide any historical context, and does not even mention the word "colonisation". Rap music and the memorial experience of the different rappers interviewed in this article (Médine, Rim'K and Imhotep) would have been a relevant opening for more historical contextualization, as well as the role of rap music in the

diffusion of a dissonant memory on the Algerian war of Independence. This connection is quickly made in another article, where the author stresses that rap music and "songs like "Alger Pleure" by Médine [can] raise the issue of memory" (Lecherbonnier, 2021). Binet nonetheless mentions the introduction of one of Médine's songs ("17 Octobre") in history schoolbooks, quickly brushing the possibilities for rap music to have a role in memorial debates (2012).

A 2018 article in *Libération* about the controversy around Médine and his concert in the Bataclan puts forward a memorial debate between the victims of the 2015 terrorist attack and the victims of French colonisation (Bampély, 2018). The author writes on the main question of the time, "Should Médine play in the Bataclan?". With insights from "the law, the morality and the market logic", he tries to answer this question. Reviewing the third perspective of analyse ("the market logic"), he accuses the commercial logic of contemporary rap music to eclipse protest rap and its premise. Thus, he claims that

> "The role of the engaged artist is to provoke, to open spaces of controversies. He must shock, strike, and trouble public opinion, the politician, and the bourgeois. He puts into question the upper-class privileges, sometimes competes with elected representatives to represent the people's voice. […] And all the "conscious" rappers who will recall this past that does not pass, who will denounce symbolic and structural violence, who will exert a counter-power proposing an alternative to an authority's decisions will know censorship."

The author of the article argues that because of this role, the artist socially or politically engaged will always find resistance or censorship or will be marginalised. In light of the controversy, he argues that Médine embodies the collective memory of an "unbearable colonial pain" conflicting with the collective memory of the Bataclan attacks in 2015. Thus, the author claims that these two collective memories are competing, creating controversy. This analysis shows how the colonial memory is a

touchy topic in France, and how quickly it is put in conflict with a collective memory better included in the national narrative. This illustrates the work of Rothberg on competitive memories, in reaction to which he proposes a multi-directional memory, equally putting forward all memories (2009). Regarding his work, it appears that the dissonant memories that rappers offer are doubly marginalised. They are put aside by the music industry (not aired on radio) and in French society more generally.

The Algerian War of Independence is also a point of criticism on school programmes, as the article by Lecherbonnier shows (2021). Some articles discuss this criticism through the place of rap music in school (programmes). A 2014 article in *Le Monde* mentions the gap between "classical" references and students' interests, drawing on teachers' interviews to show the benefits of using rap in music or literature courses (Bidan, 2014). Kery James and Médine are both held as major artists to study, respectively for literary and historical courses. This shows how rap music can be useful in triggering historical and memorial questions. Studying these texts in school can stimulate students' interest, as we have seen young people are the major audience of rap music in France (see Rap in France). Moreover, it highlights the role of rappers as transmitters of dissonant collective memory.

If this article is more focused on high school, rap music is also studied in French elite schools and Universities. Indeed, at the ENS (*Ecole Normale Supérieure*), a seminar named "*La Plume et le Bitume*" ("The pen and the pavement") proposes group analysis of rappers' work, before meeting the artist to discuss students' insights. Similarly, several universities propose conferences with rappers (Belgacem, 2015). If these meetings are more focused on literary aspects than historical ones, it nonetheless

shows how rap music can successfully penetrate school programmes and brings an additional dimension to the social role of rappers.

Finally, the interest of the three rappers studied for historical figures is mentioned in two articles from *Le Monde*. In 2022, the trial of Blaise Compaoré ended, and the former President was found guilty of the assassination of Thomas Sankara in 1987. In this context, a large mural representing Sankara is inaugurated in Ivry-sur-Seine. The article presents the artist who made the mural and Sankara, explaining the leader's political ideas. In a sentence, the author also mentions how rap music "turned Sankara into its new hero", citing notably Youssoupha as a rapper using references to Sankara (Minisini, 2022).

The journalist here claims that rap music chose Sankara as a hero because of his revolutionary spirit and because of the need for rap music for new "punchlines and mythical characters" (Minisini, 2022). This analysis seems incomplete, as Thomas Sankara is mainly used as a Pan-African icon, stressing solidarity among Black people facing racism and discrimination (in French society). As a result, the use of the figure of Sankara in rap music is depoliticised, giving an image of rap more focused on provocation (punchlines) than on its place in the political scene.

However, another article insists more on the political dimension of quoting figures in rap music. As an opening for text reviews dealing with "the destiny of Black people as a minority, in France and the USA", the author presents Youssoupha and his use of Césaire (Birnbaum, 2016). More specifically, it shows how the rapper quotes Césaire in the song "Négritude" (2015), focusing on the conceptualisation of Black identity as a universal identity. The example of Youssoupha is only used in the article as an opening to present other literary texts on the same topic. Thus, it does not go deeper into rap

music and its numerous references to Césaire or *négritude*. Nonetheless, this article shows that rappers include themselves in cultural, historical, and political issues and tackle such topics the same way that literary writers would. It is important because it creates a link between the authors usually celebrated in French society and rap authors. It places them on the same level of literary creation, touching on similar topics.

As previous chapters show, rappers often overlap their social critique and engagement with historical and memorial perspectives. This is especially true for the three rappers studied in this research. However, it appears that the generalist press usually separates these two aspects. The social and political engagement of rappers is an occasion to talk about the *banlieues*, which still seem to be subject to an imagery of violence and delinquency. However, in opposition to the early 2000s press, the newspapers analysed rather acknowledge and recognise the social role of rap music and some rappers.

In addition, the role of rap music in knowledge transmission is only briefly mentioned in most of the articles. Thematic analysis of the ties between rap music and history is not really found in the generalist press. Moreover, these themes are rather tackled from a different starting point, such as a critique of the teaching of the Algerian War of Independence. Similarly, the power of rap music to start a historical or memorial-related public discussion is not clearly stated in these articles. On the contrary, the specialised press seems more aware of the possibility of rap to set up public debate.

2. Rappers as knowledge transmitters in the specialised press

The specialised press included in this analysis comes from the websites Abcdr du Son and Le Rap en France, as well as Karim Hammou's blog, Sur un Son Rap. As these

sources are only dealing with rap music, they tend to tackle more in-depth the topics mentioned by rap artists. Moreover, the authors better understand the codes of rap music (such as provocation for example) and are addressing a public mainly already listening to rap music. These factors explain why there is more analysis of the historical and memorial aspects of French rap.

Indeed, the postcolonial or historical aspect of rap music is more explained in these sources. For example, Karim Hammou published an article titled "Postcolonial Revolts and Memories in French Rap (1992-2012)", which is linked to the conference (of the same name) he presented in 2017 at the Quai Branly Museum. The location of this Museum to speak about postcolonial memories is significant. Indeed, the Quai Branly Museum has been at the heart of controversies around the restitution debate for several years, because its collection is filled with objects and artefacts from former French colonies, mainly in Asia and Africa. Moreover, dealing with rap music in a museum contributes to the recognition of rap music in the French cultural landscape in general. The choice of the Quai Branly Museum confirms the link between rap music and postcolonial studies, more specifically.

In this conference, Hammou thoroughly analyses four songs dealing with the memory of slavery and colonisation, showing how different artists put forward the violence of colonisation and the links with current racist discrimination. The songs chosen by Hammou for this article are not overlapping with the songs studied in this research. However, he mentions several other songs during his presentation, including "Black Out (Youssoupha, 2015) and "Enfant du destin (Kounta Kinté)" (Médine, 2008). The themes tackled by Hammou align with the issues mentioned earlier (see Chapters 1

and 2), showing how rap music has a historically informed perspective on nowadays social issues.

Other articles or interviews also offer a more in-depth analysis of the place of history in the rapper's work. For example, Le Rap en France published an article about storytelling in Médine's work, highlighting this writing practice as part of the rapper's engagement. Moreover, regarding the predominant historical component of the storytelling songs, the author concludes that "storytelling is not enough to designate these songs anymore. [Médine] practices *historytelling*" (Fortems, 2012; emphasis added). This shows how rap music, writing techniques and history are successfully combined by the rapper.

The question of the place of history in Médine's work is also discussed lengthily in a podcast interview conducted by the Abcdr du Son in 2022. The rapper explains the shock and betrayal he felt when discovering colonisation and decolonisation (specifically in Algeria). He indicates how this led to his interest in dissonant history and memories, and to the will to transmit them to people that could have felt the same. He also mentions the reception of his historical references, putting forward positive reactions among his audience to whom he taught "who someone was" or "certain parts of history" (in Bossavie, 2022, 31:05-31:20). Médine's experience here illustrates the gaps in the French school system, and show the role that rappers can play in filling those gaps. It links Médine's work with memory activism, specifically regarding the colonization and decolonization of Algeria.

The rapper also details his goal, which is to "enlarge consciousness", giving a wider perspective on historical events to better reflect on the past and consequently the present (in Bossavie, 2022, 31:45). This idea is also present in another interview from

the Abcdr du Son, where Médine stresses the research he conducts before touching upon topics such as colonial history or French identity (zo., 2008). This shows the involvement of the rapper towards historical knowledge, transmitted in the "least subjective" way possible (in zo., 2008).

At the same time, Médine evokes some doubts about the historical content of his texts, because of the impossibility to encompass all the nuances and complexities of a topic in "a song of four minutes" (in Bossavie, 2022, 34:40). In addition, he denounces the tendency of the audience to constantly contradict the perspective on history proposed in his songs (not in a didactic way but rather for the sake of contradiction). The rapper explains this behaviour has made him slow down on historical songs. He recognises that this is an "abandonment of the fight for knowledge and its transmission" (in Bossavie, 2022, 36:52), but does not exclude the possibility to come back to it once it will feel possible to discuss historical and memorial issues. This show how transmission of knowledge is important for the rapper, and how the reception of this knowledge can be an eye-opener[39] or a re-affirmation of a tunnelled vision of history. Thus, it confirms the findings of Chapter 6, where comments going on both directions were mentioned.

The rapper also comes back on the biggest controversy of his career, about secularism and his song "Don't Laïk". The reception of this song, in particular, was rather chaotic and polarised the public debate, but the rapper claims he managed to "create a dialogue" and a debate on secularism in France, which he says was "more than necessary" (in Bossavie, 2022, 52:08). The fact he was available (once the epitome of

[39] Rap can be eye-opener on historical topics as illustrated by the personal experience of one of the interviewers, who says she heard about the "17th of October [1961] thanks to [Médine's] song." (in Bossavie, 2022, 36:52)

the controversy has passed) to discuss with journalists, elected representatives or other public personalities allowed him to contribute to the debate. In that regard, he felt he was useful in triggering this public discussion, as his perspective was heard "despite the media chaos" (in Bossavie, 2022, 52:40). Thus, this interview also highlights the perspective of the rapper himself on the debate he created. Médine defends a rather positive outcome of this controversy, thus showing that rap music can indeed orient the public debate on some topics. The reception of this song has to be nuanced, as the debate did not include historical perspectives on secularism (even though it is linked to colonial history, specifically regarding Islam – see Bozzo, 2006).

The figures mentioned by artists are also the topic of interview questions or articles. Thus, an article from Le Rap en France reviews the references to Frantz Fanon in rap music. The figure of Fanon is used since the early stages of French rap in the 1990s (Lecoeur, 2015). Thus, the article highlights the stability of Franon as a reference for French rappers, including Médine and Youssoupha. Rappers underline how Fanon's work and thought are still relevant in France, in the 1990s or the 2010s. Moreover, the didactic aspect of putting forward such references is also mentioned, as illustrated by AL from the group Anfalsh, who discovered Fanon for the first time in a rap song (Lecoeur, 2015). This shows how such figures are marginalised in education, and how rap music can open knowledge about them.

Similarly, the figures important in rappers' lives are discussed in interviews. For example, Médine explains his fascination for Malcolm X, the books he read and the research he did about him (in Ouafa, 2020; in Bossavie, 2022). Indeed, the figure is very much present in his early songs, alongside the references to the Black Panther Party. However, Médine critically reflects on this heroisation, as he mentions another book

on Malcolm X's life (that the rapper prefaced) which contributed to the nuance of this figure. This shows the evolution of the rapper, which is also felt in his work. Indeed, references to Malcolm X (in particular) or any other historical figure (in general) are scarce in his last albums. In a similar stance, Youssoupha claimed in an interview that he does not "glorifies Africa" (in Maïzi & JB, 2009). Taking distance with figures held as heroes can be linked (in a more global perspective) to refusing the structure of the national narrative, preferring historical nuance to it. In that regard, rappers are in a public history approach and prepare the reception of their work as such.

Therefore, specialised press appears more involved in the historical and memorial approach taken by rappers. The reception by professionals of rap music tackles rappers' work more diversely. In addition, it provides a better understanding of their motivations, specifically around the history and figures they use. The theme of the *banlieue* is rather absent (compared to the generalist press) and the interviews appear lengthier and more in-depth. However, the sources found are not equally distributed among the rappers studied, and it shows that Médine is way more asked about the place of figures or History in his music. This suggests that themes such as the *devoir de mémoire* or dissonant memories are more tackled by journalists when they have a prominent place in the rapper's career. While it is expected, it should not obscure the fact that even scarce references can convey such issues. As rappers are artists, the lyrics of their songs are usually purposeful and meaningful.

Conclusion

This chapter was dedicated to studying the reception of the songs studied in both generalist and specialised press. Studying the reception was relevant because it shows how rappers, and their historical and memorial work, are tackled by journalists. Both

generalist and specialised press will then pass on their work to an audience that can be foreign to rap music in general, or foreign to the rappers' work in particular.

The results suggest that while the generalist press is scarce about the historical and memorial aspects of rap music, it is putting forward the imagery of the *banlieues* and the controversies surrounding the rappers. Moreover, the connection between the social and historical engagement of rappers is not always made, suggesting they are two different aspects of Médine, Youssoupha or Kery James' work (which contradicts the results of Chapter 4). On the contrary, specialised press and blogs widely discuss about the relations between the rappers' work and history. Interviews are also more focused on this aspect and allow the readership to better understand the goals and motivations of the artists.

This difference in treatment can be explained by the different audiences of these media. While specialised press addresses a public already interested in rap music, consequently potentially looking for in-depth interviews and analysis, generalist press is dedicated to general news. This differentiation can reinforce the dichotomy between rap audiences and rap detractors, therefore contributing to the negative image of rap music among non-amateur audiences. More importantly, it shows that the message of the artist is not always clearly passed on, and their work is not always received in all its multiplicity. This highlights the "paradoxical legitimacy of rap music" that Hammou described (2014; also see Chapters 1 and 2) as well as the persistent marginalisation of colonial history and memories.

Conclusion Part Three

This part analysed the reception of the selected rap songs and more particularly the reception of their historical content. The results on YouTube comments showed the creation of a network of information. Indeed, the large majority of reactions were very positive, showing commitment from the fans (Staiger, 2005). But beyond aesthetic comments, Chapter 6 showed the efficiency of rap music to transmit historical and memorial knowledge. The emotions triggered by the songs show the importance of such topics for the rappers' audiences. Moreover, the creation of fans' networks in the comments sections displays how audiences also take over the function of knowledge transmitters.

The discussion is enriched by personal knowledge, sometimes stemming from individual or familial memory. In other instances, people provide additional references, adding to the knowledge network. This shows their interest in the issues tackled by the rappers, as they are often not taught in schools. The criticism of the school system is also found in the comments and is linked to the transformation of rappers into teachers. Indeed, part of the audience celebrates the artists as teachers, which highlights both the role of rap music in providing dissonant memories and the gaps in the French school system. The parallel that fans sometimes draw between the rappers and the leaders also shows their prominent position in current social and political struggles.

The overlapping of social struggles and anti-colonial or antiracist history is not fully explored in the generalist press. Indeed, the analysis of articles in *Le Monde* and *Libération* shows that rap music is often linked to the *banlieues* and their social problems, without mentioning the discriminations applying to these spaces,

considered by many inhabitants as a neocolonial situation. The historical work of rappers and their diverse use of numerous leaders of antiracist and anti-colonial struggles are not important topics in these articles. It appears that the generalist press is still constrained by the popular imagery of rap as violent music that is not to be taken seriously.

On the other hand, the specialised press is more concerned with these issues. The interviews they offer provide insights into the rappers' historical work and their motivations. Thus, the specialised press seems more aware of the potential of rap music to tackle contemporary topics, while putting them in historical perspective. It also appears more likely to discuss dissonant memories, therefore offering space for these memories in the public realm. However, the smaller reach of these articles still makes it complicated for the dissonant memories expressed by rappers to find a place in the public debate – at least through rap.

Conclusions and discussion

This analysis drew on postcolonial, memory, and public history studies to show how French rap artists create dissonant memories that challenge the national narrative in their work. In doing so they present a form of public history.

The postcolonial critique emerged in French rap as artists (usually from the *banlieues*) denounce their living conditions through their art. Their denunciation, when coupled with their attention to the construction of race (processes of racialisation) in French society, reveals the continuities of the colonial system in the *banlieues*. The feeling that “France is still a colonial state” (Les Indigènes de la République, 2005) stems from the discrimination and racism that non-White people suffer from. Moreover, it is linked to the difficulties the French state and large parts of French society have felt in tackling the colonial past and to a national resistance to questioning its so-called Republican model. This was the case in the 2000s during the golden age of French (hardcore) rap, and it is still visible today, in the aftermath of the 2020s BLM demonstrations.

This research focused on three major figures in French political rap, who have been active for over twenty years. Médine, Youssoupha and Kery James have a desire to convey the voice of the marginalised people from the *banlieues*. Moreover, they also have a specific interest in historical and memorial issues, which can be linked to their own multicultural identity. However, further research could include more rappers (including women and gender minorities!) to better assess the extent to which rap music contributes to the diffusion of dissonant history and memories. The three artists studied here are indeed major figures, but they are not alone. Furthermore, gender

issues could be tackled in relation to the figures put forward by the artists, exploring female and LBGTQ+ antiracist and anti-colonial heroes.

Through the analysis of their texts, I explained how these rappers use the figures of prominent Pan-African and Civil Rights leaders to perform a *devoir de mémoire*. While this analysis focused on lyrics, the "shout-outs" narratives, and the presentation of heroic Black leaders, it did not engage in visual and musical analysis. This was due to the limits of scope, time, and researcher training. However, music and video are key aspects of hip-hop studies and this work should, therefore, be read alongside other scholarly analyses such as the ones of Mowang Ngoula (2021) or Shuman (2021)[40], and this would be a strand of analysis to pick up in further research[41]. Nevertheless, the text analysis showed how rappers give tribute to the figures, thus emphasising the contribution of non-White people to global events. The discussion of evidence also revealed how artists link themselves to leaders, as a way to show that they continue the struggles of those heroes. This proves how racism and discriminations are still a reality in France, confirming the necessity to fight them.

Finally, the discourse analysis of rappers' songs showed the role of their multicultural background in the use of these figures. Leaders are cultural references for rappers, who rather use those than the ones put forward in the French national narrative. It highlights the will of the artists to distance themselves from the pressure to integrate into French society that has required various groups to de-emphasise (or ignore) their historical, cultural, and memorial background. Quantitative methods could also be

[40] For more contributions, a good starting point can be the issue 2020-3 of *Itinéraires. Littérature, textes, cultures* directed by Nachtergael and titled Le rap, une poésie de performances (Rap, A Poetry of Performances) (2021).
[41] See, for example, the video clip of "Musique Nègre" (2016) directed by Leïla Sy, which an article describes as "a Black politics History course" (Jamsheed, 2016)

used to assess more concretely how many figures are used, which ones and with which frequency. In that regard, computational techniques can help "finding thematic patterns in or between entire oeuvres", which would be of relevance for further research (Huijnen, 2019, p. 993). The qualitative methods used in this research have established that the memory conveyed is not only that of the leaders' names and history but also that of their struggles, which rappers take up.

The importance of the historical figures resonates with the audience's reception. Comments sections on YouTube videos are a space in which (Black) pride is displayed, as well as gratitude towards the rappers, who teach something or pass on the memory of the figures and their struggles. Thus, it appears that historical knowledge, both contextual and about the figures is circulating in the comments section. It is also a space where the audience engages with the rapper's text, adding their own knowledge. In that regard, rappers are compared to (history) teachers, confirming their didactic role. This entails discussions (mainly) of the French school system, which selectively omits large facets of French history (relating to immigration and/or colonialism). Moreover, the audience draws parallels between the rappers and the leaders, going further in the identification process initiated by the artists.

The analysis of YouTube comments could be replaced by surveys. It would allow the researcher to better assess the impact of rap music on the audience's historical-memorial knowledge. In addition, it would provide complementary information on their socio-historical background, in line with the PCF surveys. This would result in a more precise portrait of rap audiences. Alternatively, quantitative methods would help to show the share of comments relating to the historical-memorial aspect of the songs. However, despite the small sample, this analysis confirmed the role of rappers as public

historians. Médine, Youssoupha and Kery James widen their audience's historical knowledge and perpetuate the memory of antiracist and anti-colonial figures through their art.

The role of rap music in transmitting the history and memories of antiracist and anti-colonial figures is well shown by the specialised press, which dedicates different articles to these aspects of rap music. Few articles were found dealing specifically with the three artists studied. Thus, further research should use more press sources to have a more representative sample. Nonetheless, this analysis showed that rap music journalists and experts pay close attention to the lyrics and the social role of rap music. The mainstream press has a different perspective, as the articles on rap music presented a systematic link to the *banlieues*.

This research showed how rap music can apply concepts relating to memory and identity, such as *devoir de mémoire* and dissonant memory. Indeed, rappers aim at decolonising the French narrative, the basis for France's collective memory and national identity. It demonstrated that by including and paying homage to anti-colonial heroes rappers voice a collective memory of non-White communities (in France mainly Black people and Arabic people/Muslims), which resonates with a large part of their audience.

In addition, this research illustrated how rappers are memory activists, in that they are also linked to grassroots memory activism, through civic associations. In that regard, this research expanded knowledge on the uses of the *devoir de mémoire* outside the institutions. It also showed how their memory activism is built on by their audience, who use fan networks to pass on decolonised knowledge and keep the *devoir de mémoire* alive.

Such research can easily be linked to a critique of French *curricula*. Indeed, the dissonant memory conveyed by rappers, their use of anti-racist and anticolonial figures, and the fact that the audience sees them as teachers should feed discussions on the way French school teaches the colonial past. Leaving the Republican myth behind and considering subaltern voices and including them in school *curricula* should be a crucial matter. And even more in the context of the rise of the far-right sustained by and encouraging islamophobia and racism. Fifty years after the end of the Second World War France started to review its narrative and give space to survivors of the camps. It is time now, more than sixty years after the official end of the French Empire, to address the colonial past and its legacies.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1

L’Appel des Indigènes

indigenes-republique.fr/le-p-i-r/appel-des-indigenes-de-la-republique/

NOUS SOMMES LES INDIGENES DE LA REPUBLIQUE !

Rendu public en Janvier 2005, cet appel à été signé par des milliers de personnes.

Discriminés à l’embauche, au logement, à la santé, à l’école et aux loisirs, les personnes issues des colonies, anciennes ou actuelles, et de l’immigration post-coloniale sont les premières victimes de l’exclusion sociale et de la précarisation. Indépendamment de leurs origines effectives, les populations des « quartiers » sont « indigénisées », reléguées aux marges de la société. Les « banlieues » sont dites « zones de non-droit » que la République est appelée à « reconquérir ». Contrôles au faciès, provocations diverses, persécutions de toutes sortes se multiplient tandis que les brutalités policières, parfois extrêmes, ne sont que rarement sanctionnées par une justice qui fonctionne à deux vitesses. Pour exonérer la République, on accuse nos parents de démission alors que nous savons les sacrifices, les efforts déployés, les souffrances

endurées. Les mécanismes coloniaux de la gestion de l'islam sont remis à l'ordre du jour avec la constitution du Conseil français du Culte Musulman sous l'égide du ministère de l'Intérieur. Discriminatoire, sexiste, raciste, la loi anti-foulard est une loi d'exception aux relents coloniaux. Tout aussi colonial, le parcage des harkis et enfants de harkis. Les populations issues de la colonisation et de l'immigration sont aussi l'objet de discriminations politiques. Les rares élus sont généralement cantonnés au rôle de « beur » ou de « black » de service. On refuse le droit de vote à ceux qui ne sont pas « français », en même temps qu'on conteste « l'enracinement » de ceux qui le sont. Le droit du sol est remis en cause. Sans droit ni protection, menacées en permanence d'arrestation et d'expulsion, des dizaines de milliers de personnes sont privées de papiers. La liberté de circulation est déniée ; un nombre croissant de Maghrébins et d'Africains sont contraints à franchir les frontières illégalement au risque de leurs vies.

La France a été un Etat colonial… Pendant plus de quatre siècles, elle a participé activement à la traite négrière et à la déportation des populations de l'Afrique subsaharienne. Au prix de terribles massacres, les forces coloniales ont imposé leur joug sur des dizaines de peuples dont elles ont spolié les richesses, détruit les cultures, ruiné les traditions, nié l'histoire, effacé la mémoire. Les tirailleurs d'Afrique, chair à canon pendant les deux guerres mondiales, restent victimes d'une scandaleuse inégalité de traitement.

La France reste un Etat colonial ! En Nouvelle Calédonie, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyane, Réunion, Polynésie règnent répression et mépris du suffrage universel. Les enfants de ces colonies sont, en France, relégués au statut d'immigrés, de Français de seconde zone sans l'intégralité des droits. Dans certaines de ses anciennes colonies, la France continue de mener une politique de domination. Une part énorme des richesses

locales est aspirée par l'ancienne métropole et le capital international. Son armée se conduit en Côte d'Ivoire comme en pays conquis.

Le traitement des populations issues de la colonisation prolonge, sans s'y réduire, la politique coloniale. Non seulement le principe de l'égalité devant la loi n'est pas respecté mais la loi elle-même n'est pas toujours égale (double peine, application du statut personnel aux femmes d'origine maghrébine, sub-saharienne…). La figure de l'« indigène » continue à hanter l'action politique, administrative et judiciaire ; elle innerve et s'imbrique à d'autres logiques d'oppression, de discrimination et d'exploitation sociales. Ainsi, aujourd'hui, dans le contexte du néo-libéralisme, on tente de faire jouer aux travailleurs immigrés le rôle de dérégulateurs du marché du travail pour étendre à l'ensemble du salariat encore plus de précarité et de flexibilité.

La gangrène coloniale s'empare des esprits. L'exacerbation des conflits dans le monde, en particulier au Moyen-Orient, se réfracte immédiatement au sein du débat français. Les intérêts de l'impérialisme américain, le néo-conservatisme de l'administration Bush rencontrent l'héritage colonial français. Une frange active du monde intellectuel, politique et médiatique français, tournant le dos aux combats progressistes dont elle se prévaut, se transforme en agents de la « pensée » bushienne . Investissant l'espace de la communication, ces idéologues recyclent la thématique du « choc des civilisations » dans le langage local du conflit entre « République » et « communautarisme ». Comme aux heures glorieuses de la colonisation, on tente d'opposer les Berbères aux Arabes, les Juifs aux « Arabo-musulmans » et aux Noirs. Les jeunes « issus de l'immigration » sont ainsi accusés d'être le vecteur d'un nouvel antisémitisme. Sous le vocable jamais défini d'« intégrisme », les populations d'origine

africaine, maghrébine ou musulmane sont désormais identifiées comme la Cinquième colonne d'une nouvelle barbarie qui menacerait l'Occident et ses « valeurs ». Frauduleusement camouflée sous les drapeaux de la laïcité, de la citoyenneté et du féminisme, cette offensive réactionnaire s'empare des cerveaux et reconfigure la scène politique. Elle produit des ravages dans la société française. Déjà, elle est parvenue à imposer sa rhétorique au sein même des forces progressistes, comme une gangrène.

Attribuer le monopole de l'imaginaire colonial et raciste à la seule extrême-droite est une imposture politique et historique. L'idéologie coloniale perdure, transversale aux grands courants d'idées qui composent le champ politique français.

La décolonisation de la République reste à l'ordre du jour ! La République de l'Egalité est un mythe. L'Etat et la société doivent opérer un retour critique radical sur leur passé-présent colonial. Il est temps que la France interroge ses Lumières, que l'universalisme égalitaire, affirmé pendant la Révolution Française, refoule ce nationalisme arc-bouté au « chauvinisme de l'universel », censé « civiliser » sauvages et sauvageons. Il est urgent de promouvoir des mesures radicales de justice et d'égalité qui mettent un terme aux discriminations racistes dans l'accès au travail, au logement, à la culture et à la citoyenneté. Il faut en finir avec les institutions qui ramènent les populations issues de la colonisation à un statut de sous-humanité.

Nos parents, nos grands-parents ont été mis en esclavage, colonisés, animalisés. Mais ils n'ont pas été broyés. Ils ont préservé leur dignité d'humains à travers la résistance héroïque qu'ils ont mené pour s'arracher au joug colonial. Nous sommes leurs héritiers comme nous sommes les héritiers de ces Français qui ont résisté à la barbarie nazie et de tous ceux qui se sont engagés avec les opprimés, démontrant, par leur engagement et leurs sacrifices, que la lutte anti-coloniale est indissociable du combat pour l'égalité

sociale, la justice et la citoyenneté. Dien Bien Phu est leur victoire. Dien Bien Phu n'est pas une défaite mais une victoire de la liberté, de l'égalité et de la fraternité !

Pour ces mêmes raisons, nous sommes aux côtés de tous les peuples (de l'Afrique à la Palestine, de l'Irak à la Tchétchènie, des Caraïbes à l'Amérique latine…) qui luttent pour leur émancipation, contre toute les formes de domination impérialiste, coloniale ou néocoloniale.

NOUS, descendants d'esclaves et de déportés africains, filles et fils de colonisés et d'immigrés, NOUS, Français et non-Français vivants en France, militantes et militants engagé-es dans les luttes contre l'oppression et les discriminations produites par la République post-coloniale, lançons un appel à celles et ceux qui sont parties prenantes de ces combats à se réunir en Assises de l'anti-colonialisme en vue de contribuer à l'émergence d'une dynamique autonome qui interpelle le système politique et ses acteurs, et, au-delà, l'ensemble de la société française, dans la perspective d'un combat commun de tous les opprimés et exploités pour une démocratie sociale véritablement égalitaire et universelle.

Le 8 mai 1945, la République révèle ses paradoxes : le jour même où les Français fêtent la capitulation nazie, une répression inouïe s'abat sur les colonisés algériens du NordConstantinois : des milliers de morts !

Le 8 mai prochain, 60ème anniversaire de ce massacre, poursuivons le combat anti-colonial par la première Marche des indigènes de la République !

Nous sommes les indigènes de la République !

Appendix 2

How Much More French Can I Be?

By Médine

Sunday, Nov. 06, 2005

People like me--the descendants of immigrants, whether Arab, black or Asian--are turning to our roots and embracing our heritage, just the opposite of what our parents did when they arrived. My grandparents, for example, who came to France from Algeria to live, work and build a better life, accepted the role of guest. They did all they could not just to fit in but to become invisible. Calling attention to themselves usually meant trouble--endless ID and visa checks from police, racist remarks and insults--so they avoided that. They tried as much as possible to integrate, and in doing so shut away their customs, language and heritage.

I certainly don't belittle their choice. But people of my generation are not shy about embracing their heritage, and, far from seeking invisibility, we're standing up to denounce the prejudice and injustice we face. In my case, Islam is an enormous part of who I am, just as being French is. The two aren't in opposition or even mutually exclusive. Yet when you hear the debate in France today, you'd swear they must be.

The people who live in projects like those where last week's riots raged are treated as second-class citizens. We have less access to the rights and services of the republic--schools are run down; job opportunities are remote. What we do have is a supermarket, a mall for low-cost shops, a few fast-food joints and maybe a movie complex. That's it. The idea is to create just enough diversion so we stay where we are. The message is, Don't come in to mix with the people in the city centers. That's what the police tell you

when they stop you on a bus coming into town: "You have no business in the center? Then you have no reason to be there. Go back where you belong."

Before Sept. 11, I would have said this was a kind of residual racism. The problems people had with us were due to our ethnicity, our skin color. Today, with many young people returning to religion as they start searching for their own identities, faith is becoming the difference that's most often pointed out. I'm not just a black guy or an Arab anymore; I'm a Muslim. And that's a code word for alien, someone who's determined not to fit in.

But I was born and raised in France. I've been a citizen since birth. How much more French can I be? And there are many more people like me, not just Muslims but blacks, Asians and South Asians. It's time for the French to reject those outdated labels. And it's time for minorities to reject the cult of victimization too. Things aren't perfect. There are a lot of problems. Those problems exploded last week, unleashing the long-held resentment of people who feel unwanted, scorned and swept into the margins like so much trash. To change that, the gap between the banlieue and the rest of France must be bridged. We need to make peace with the things that make us different. I'm French, I'm Muslim, and there are millions like me. We live here, and we're not going anywhere. So let's start getting used to it.

• Médine, 22, is a Muslim rapper from Le Havre. His latest record is *Jihad: The Greatest Struggle Is Within Yourself*

Appendix 3

Ces artistes fantômes que sont les rappeurs français

TRIBUNE

Youssoupha, rappeur

Nos mots, nos musiques, nos convictions contre les polémiques surjouées.

Publié le 18 avril 2009 à 11h59, modifié le 19 octobre 2009 à 18h01 / Temps de Lecture 5 min.

Selon certains médias, je suis *"le rappeur qui veut faire tuer Eric Zemmour"*. Voilà pour les présentations. Mes papiers? J'en ai quelques-uns, comme ceux que nous avons reçus cette semaine: une notification d'avocat signifiant qu'une plainte a été déposée par M. Eric Zemmour et ses avocats auprès du procureur de la République pour *"des faits de menaces de crimes"* et *"d'injure publique"*. Ces accusations visent le texte d'un de mes titres récemment paru sur la Toile.

Revoilà donc le spectre terrifiant du rap aux valeurs morales crapuleuses et aux invectives criminelles. C'est le retour du hip-hop qui terrorise. Ennemi sanguinaire des institutions les plus honorables de ce pays. Les monstres sont revenus. La psychose nous rattrape. Quoiqu'elle ne nous ait jamais vraiment quittés.

Encore une fois, un rappeur est placé au centre de la polémique. Il faudra le clouer au pilori ou le faire passer à la barre. C'est seulement à cette condition que l'ordre social, médiatique et surtout moral retrouvera son harmonie. Cette fois-ci, la foudre m'a choisi.

Je m'appelle Youssoupha, j'ai 29ans, et la chanson incriminée s'intitule *A force de le dire*.

C'est un titre où j'aborde divers sujets de société, parmi lesquels les mauvais effets des drogues douces, l'assassinat des leaders d'opinion, l'élection de Barack Obama, la lutte contre le sida, la guerre au Congo, la violence dans les stades… Mais curieusement c'est un passage en particulier qui a fait couler beaucoup d'encre et déclencher beaucoup de clics: *"A force de juger nos gueules les gens le savent/Qu'à la télé souvent les chroniqueurs diabolisent les banlieusards/ Chaque fois que ça pète on dit qu'c'est nous/J'mets un billet sur la tête de celui qui fera taire ce con d'Eric Zemmour."* A *"l'insu de mon plein gré"*, donc, j'ai défrayé la chronique.

"POURVU QU'IL N'ARRIVE RIEN À M. ZEMMOUR"

Me voilà placardé un peu partout sur le Net et dans quelques journaux comme *"le rappeur qui menace violemment Zemmour"* ou encore *"le rappeur qui a mis un contrat sur Eric Zemmour"* ou, comme je l'écrivais au début de ce papier pour mieux vous situer, *"le rappeur qui veut faire tuer Eric Zemmour"*. Tout ça n'est pas très gai. En même temps, ma chanson ne l'est pas non plus, donc je peux le comprendre. Mais tout de même, l'ambiguïté cède la place aux interprétations les plus louches. Dans la confusion générale, certaines équivoques ouvrent la piste d'un contrat criminel sur le chroniqueur de *"On n'est pas couché"* sur France2.

Je me retrouve à me soucier du sort quotidien de M. Zemmour. Pourvu qu'il ne lui arrive rien car, sinon, des milliers de paires d'yeux se fixeraient dans ma direction. Assimiler un rappeur à un agitateur dangereux n'est pas un fait très original. Dans les mass médias, ça pourrait presque faire office de marronnier, comme la rentrée scolaire, le beaujolais nouveau ou le passage à l'heure d'été, tellement les précédents sont nombreux.

Il y avait déjà eu le scandale NTM. Le groupe avait été condamné pour *"propos outrageants"* envers les forces de l'ordre lors d'un concert en 1995. Plus tard, il y aura le procès Sniper (poursuivi en 2004 par le ministère de l'intérieur, Nicolas Sarkozy en tête), mais aussi le tapage MonsieurR (accusé d'incitation à la haine et de sexisme par le député UMP François Grosdidier en novembre2005). Tous ont été relaxés. Et à l'ombre de toutes ces *"affaires"* sulfureuses et racoleuses, on oublie l'acharnement judiciaire contre Hamé du groupe La Rumeur, accusé de diffamation publique envers la police nationale pour un article dénonçant la brutalité policière. Mais ses descriptions étaient tellement avérées que le parquet lui-même a reconnu que, *"replacés dans leur contexte, ces propos ne constituent qu'une critique des comportements abusifs, susceptibles d'être reprochés sur les cinquante dernières années aux forces de polices à l'occasion d'événements pris dans leur globalité"*. Il a été relaxé à plusieurs reprises lors des différentes instances du procès, mais l'Etat envisage depuis l'année dernière de se pourvoir en cassation une seconde fois (!) pour le faire condamner enfin. Pour une affaire de ce type, c'est du jamais-vu dans l'histoire contemporaine de la justice française. Quel acharnement, quelle usure ! Qui en parle ? Pourtant, cette fois-ci, nous sommes bien dans la réalité.

DANS L'OMBRE, ON FAIT TOUJOURS DE LA MUSIQUE

J'ai eu l'occasion de m'expliquer sur le sens de mes mots, ceux d'*A force de le dire*, dans le journal *Le Parisien*. Puisque ça paraissait nécessaire. Eric Zemmour est journaliste et polémiste, je suis auteur et interprète. Il n'a jamais tué personne. Moi non plus. Nous sommes tous les deux des hommes de paroles. Une quelconque divergence de point de vue qui nous opposerait relèverait forcément du débat d'idée, de la discussion. Le faire taire? Il faut l'entendre dans le sens le plus élémentaire: le remettre à sa place, le mettre

face à ses contradictions. Après tout, n'est-ce pas le sens même des lois sur les discriminations que de faire taire et de réprimer des propos qui peuvent s'avérer racistes ou *"excluant"*? Sa posture de journaliste lui confère un devoir de pertinence dont il doit prendre toute la mesure à l'occasion de chacune de ses déclarations.

Faire taire Eric Zemmour ? Effectivement. Il n'y a rien d'autre à entendre ou à comprendre ? A moins de s'imaginer que j'ai assez d'influence pour le faire assassiner ou que je suis disposé à le faire. Nous venons de quitter la réalité tangible. Revoilà le fantôme.

Le fantasme d'un rappeur-gangster-tueur. Ce que je suis censé être. Et c'est là que je déçois tout le monde. La réalité est beaucoup moins fantasque. Je ne suis ni un Che Guevara, ni un Jacques Mesrine, ni même le personnage haut en couleur d'un film de Lautner pour intenter à sa vie. Désolé pour ma mauvaise interprétation du personnage. Vous avez vu un fantôme. Ce n'était que moi. Il n'y a plus rien à signaler. L'accalmie médiatique est là. Le buzz se dégonfle. Remplacé immédiatement par l'ouragan politique autour du rappeur Orelsan. Ministres et députés ont subitement décrété l'état d'urgence pour un clip vieux de trois ans qui met en scène la déprime pathétique et trash d'un petit ami trompé. L'affaire est encore plus tapageuse, donc encore plus intéressante, confiera le membre d'un organe de presse à l'un de mes collaborateurs.

J'irai donc rendre des comptes devant les autorités compétentes. Devant la justice pour la première fois de ma vie. Pour la dernière fois, j'espère. J'irai avec mes points de vue, mes critiques, le poids de mes paroles. Leur virulence aussi. Je l'assume. Je suis un rappeur. Pas un fantôme. Dans l'ombre, on fait toujours de la musique, on défend nos convictions, on danse, on dénonce, on organise, on vend des disques, on doute, on entreprend et il nous arrive même d'être des gens bien. Arrêtez de croire aux fantômes.

Youssoupha, rappeur