

## 100% Marseillais: Marseille Rap and Defining Difference

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*Personne nous représente alors on le fait nous-mêmes/  
pour ce qu'on entend jamais, envoi de la marginale musique<sup>1</sup>*

Ever since the group IAM released “Mars contre attaque”<sup>2</sup> in 1993, Marseille rap artists wrote on the defensive: the defense of a city, an identity, and a poetry. This citation from another group, the Fonky Family, exemplifies defensiveness as a way to affirm a positive difference from the rest of France’s rap scene. One had the impression that these rappers had read and reacted to the sociological texts that called into question the authority with which they spoke of their city and their lives, particularly where definitions of their identity as either French or *beur* are concerned. Claiming to speak for the youth in the marginalized neighborhoods from the *cit  phoc ene* from which they all hail, six popular groups—Akh naton, IAM, the Fonky Family, le Troisi me Oeil, les Chiens de Paille, and Psy 4 de la Rime—treat the theme of identity in their texts. These young artists, who for the most part are of immigrant origin, consider themselves *Marseillais* before French or *beur*. Far from being a simple attachment to their home city, this association carries deep signification in the modes of self-representation in their poetry.

In order to define what it is to be “made in Marseille,” rap artists present both an insider’s and outsider’s view of themselves and their city by proscribing a uniquely Marseillais social, economic, and political context for their music. In doing so, they act as delegates to the outside world, presenting listeners with what they consider a uniquely Marseillais social, economic, and political context for their music. In this study, I explore how youth of foreign origin confront the tensions of a *m tisse* or *m t que* identity. *M t que* means “too dark” to consider oneself French,

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<sup>1</sup> Fonky Family, “Marginale Musique,” *Marginale Musique*

<sup>2</sup> IAM, “Mars contre attaque,” *Ombre est lumi re*

integrated; but not *Arabe de souche*<sup>3</sup> either. By means of the glorification of their hometown, feelings of ethnic marginality, anger against the French state, and the process of self-creation through the writing process, these youth on the margins of French society construct a *Marseillais* identification that contains elements of French and American hip-hop, Mediterranean culture, and the culture of their origins.

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« *Je viens de Marseille, la ville photique/ Ce qui implique, logique,  
l'unique chaleur de mes lyrics* »<sup>4</sup>

The emphasis on Marseille origin is one method of defining difference; for it is the place that makes the rapper, and the rapper who makes the place. These artists created a cultural and musical ideal of their city in their texts,<sup>5</sup> but it is the milieu itself that created the rappers by influencing the ideas in their poetry. In rap, the notion of place is important: the rappers demonstrate pride in being from Marseille and from a certain neighborhood—be it Belsunce or the *quartiers nord*.<sup>6</sup> The idea of having survived a difficult, immigrant, and poor neighborhood is manifested in their songs. Rappers insist that they represent their neighborhoods or cities, and “represent” is a synecdoche, for, as Adam Krims has said on the nexus of signification in rap, “an artist who represents makes a faithful reference to a lived experience in a certain place...”<sup>7</sup> It is this lived experience that has formulated the lives and by extension the identities of the rappers. Not only does the statement, “Je viens de Marseille” connote street credibility, but as Béatrice Sberna has said, it implies an attachment to Occitan or Mediterranean culture (28).

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<sup>3</sup> *Arabe de souche* is a parody of “*Français de souche*,” referring to a French-born national, assumed to have two French parents. Since *Arabe* is an unclear term for North African immigrants (see, for example, Hargreaves p. 37), and thus does not apply to many youth, who are non-Arabic speaking and French-born. The term is further complicated by IAM when they refer to themselves as “*Méditerranéen de souche*,” because an ethnic term refers to a cultural one.

<sup>4</sup> IAM, “Je viens de Marseille,” *De la planète Mars*

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Marie Jacono p. 28

<sup>6</sup> Belsunce is a poor district located in the center of the city west of by the famous Canebière boulevard; its inhabitants are mostly North African immigrants.

<sup>7</sup> Adam Krims, p. 311

For example, the Chiens de Paille describe their group of neighborhood artists, including a DJ and break dancers, as a consortium, “made in PACA.”<sup>8</sup> Frequently quipped by rappers, the Anglicism “made in” is an unmistakable sign of a manufactured product; hence, little distinction can be made between the artists and the city he represents. The rappers thereby assert a two-way identification, resisting a solely racial or ethnic one.

Many rappers proudly differentiate Marseille from the Hexagon, thereby insisting on a typically *Marseillais* way of life.<sup>9</sup> This difference stands in opposition to Paris and at the same time is conscious of Marseille’s particularities with respect to immigration and culture. For example, these groups often call their city “la planète Mars.” First used by IAM in 1991 and soon after taken up by the Fonky Family and other groups, this nickname comes from the notion that the habitants of Marseille consider themselves separated from the influence of Paris and the rest of France. This nickname is now the norm; there exists a compilation CD called “Chroniques de Mars” with the image of a giant asteroid en route towards Earth.<sup>10</sup> IAM says in “Mars contre attaque” :

De la ville la plus pauvre de France je ne peux/ Conténir ma colère  
alors que le Paris éclaire ses feux/ ...En France, Marseille est la seule  
ville où la population baisse/ Des jeunes gens nous reprochent en face/  
De parler trop souvent de la planète Mars.

In this citation, “the” Paris is personified, and its famous nickname, “la ville des lumières” is evoked in the second verse, such that IAM expresses an anger that is more than a sentiment of rivalry: when Paris lights its flames, it eclipses the city of Marseille, culturally and artistically. André Prévos has interpreted the nickname “Mars” as such: “Like the planet which has resisted efforts of exploration and settlement...Marseille has resisted integration into the Parisian sphere of influence” (721). While I agree with this statement, I would also add that being from Marseille is to be a stranger in one’s own country, not just in relation to the influence of Paris. For, a Martian has no race or ethnicity; he is foreign anywhere on earth. What’s more, there exists in these songs the image of invasions and

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<sup>8</sup> Chiens de Paille, “Mille et un fantômes,” Mille et un fantômes. The acronym “PACA” refers to the Provence-Alpes-Côte D’Auzur Region, in which Marseille lies.

<sup>9</sup> See Béatrice Sberna, p. 30.

<sup>10</sup> Various Artists, Chroniques de Mars

an even stronger vengeance against Parisian hegemony. There is the idea of “crusade” and that the rappers are “warriors” who are invading France by way of the Mediterranean.<sup>11</sup> The nickname “Mars” is thus a metaphor for the foreignness felt by young men and women who live there. In sum, this nickname, along with the characterization of Marseille as independent of Parisian influence is a manner to speak of the city in which they reside but where they are born, and consequently where they form their identities.

*« Je ne vois pas de raison de gonfler les rangs/ D'un mouvement  
qui nous classe comme des sous-blancs. »<sup>12</sup>*

One way in which Marseille rap artists define themselves is by decrying personal feelings of marginalization by using terminology imposed on them in order to shake up the French/*beur* divide. A prevalent theme in these songs is the frustration felt by rappers with foreign roots and thus their defense of a particular *Marseillais* identity. A critique of the normative forces (Prévos 717) in French society that classify, marginalize, and ultimately reject children of immigrants ranges from narrative accounts of encounters with racism to commentary on the historical evolution of the situation of the various waves of immigrants who settled in the Provence region.<sup>13</sup> However, in a city where Italians, Portuguese, and Spanish, have made the same journey over as Algerians, according to the rappers, negative attitudes about immigration tend to center around immigrants from the Maghreb. The effects constitute the principal grounds for the frustration that these artists express in their songs, and the multi-layeredness of their observations testifies to the hybridity of ethnic identity.<sup>14</sup> These rappers defy any attempt to be classified as inferior to *Français de souche*.

Rap artists reflect on incidents of blatant racism by their French compatriots, and the labels placed on them because of their appearance; the way in which they reflect on and internalize these incidents results in strengthening of their own *métèque* identities. For instance, the sentiment

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<sup>11</sup> See Fonky Family, “La résistance,” *Si Dieu Veut*

<sup>12</sup> IAM, “Où sont les roses ?” *Ombre est lumière*

<sup>13</sup> For example, see Valérie Orlando’s article, p. 398.

<sup>14</sup> The ethnic composition of these groups reflects the ethnic diversity of Marseille itself: their origins are, among others, Italian, North African, Comorian, and Spanish.

of being classed as “sous-blanc” is often expressed by the rappers, especially those of North African origin. In *L'esprit anesthésie*, the rapper Shurik'n (member of the Fonky Family), denounces racism in the form of identification controls on “Arab-looking” youth by the French police. The narrator of the song claims to be detained so often that he feels trapped by the color of his skin: ““Tes papiers fils, tu les as pas, on t'amène/ Surtout si ton nom commence par Ben.”” The officer's sarcastic remark conflates appearance with national origin, that is, decidedly non-French origin, and furthermore reveals how Arab family names can be a source of tension for youth, since they mark or denounce the youth before they can present themselves.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, IAM relates an anecdote where, while walking down the street, the narrator politely steps aside to let a woman (French, by implication) pass, who acknowledges the rapper by nervously shifting her purse out of his sight. The verse, “Ce genre de réaction a droit à mon aversion” exemplifies how racism based on appearance affects how rappers see themselves; it is a subjective construction of physical features that are interpreted not only as different from the “French” ethnicity, but as having negative characteristics.

As proud members of an international city and community, Marseille rappers tout the unifying character of their art. As Jean-Marie Jacono has said, “Marseilles binds together its inhabitants beyond the cultures of their countries of origin” (28). Thus, the sentiment of being classed as a “sous-blanc” is not only echoed by rappers of North African origin, but by those claiming non-country specific Mediterranean roots. Akhénaton compares his own immigrant experience to a game of chess where the black and white spaces share the same board but never mix. The song, “Métèque et mat” tells of Italian immigrant workers, who, when they arrived in France, suffered discrimination, which Akhénaton calls “la loi de visages pales.” Judged and treated like truants, thugs, and “merdes,” after a certain time in the country, the immigrants begin to believe their characterization. Nevertheless, Akhénaton asserts pride in his origins and of his native country, Italy, despite his loathing of racists. He says :

La pro latinité est mon rôle/ Pas étonnant venant d'un napolitain d'origine  
 espagnole/ Les surnoms dont j'écope reflétaient bien l'époque/  
 Je suis un de ceux qu'Hitler nommait nègre de l'Europe/ Et j'en suis fier...

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<sup>15</sup> The incident in question is revealed to be autobiographical, according to an interview that appears in Jean-Louis Bocquet's book, *Rap ta france*, p.28.

In my opinion, the pro-Latinity of which Akhénaton speaks is pan-Latinity: it is the idea that all the habitants of southern regions of Europe (including, of course, the Marseille region) share in cultural mixity. The nickname “nègre de l’Europe” is a powerful reminder of how racism against immigrants evolves. While Akhénaton comes closer than the other groups in asserting a preferred definition of identity with the term *métèque*, in general, the Marseille rap groups resist any single, ethnocentric definition of identity in favor of a cultural one.

*« L’Elysée suit près de la montée de la violence dans les cités/  
qu’est-ce qu’ils font pour nous ? »<sup>16</sup>*

Rappers’ manifestation of anger in all its forms calls attention to social and economic problems particular to the region and thus defends the rappers’ position of self-proclaimed truth-tellers. Using an autobiographical register in many songs, the rappers not only vividly depict their city, but also analyze the causes for these problems. Many songs are direct challenges to the French government, which they consider to be indifferent, at best, and that forces immigrant families to live in ghettos. Moreover, the state is implicated as the generator of a vicious cycle of economic marginalization, which results in poverty and unemployment, and consequently, the lawlessness of certain neighborhoods.<sup>17</sup> In turn, these same districts are nicknamed by the French state as “difficult” (*difficile*) or “sensitive” (*défavorisé*) districts. For the Fonky Family and *le Troisième Oeil*, these titles are the object of derision. In an ironic tone, they say in their texts that they proudly represent, “les quartiers dits ‘sensibles’ en France et Navarre.”<sup>18</sup> Rap is a means to project anger towards the idea of government to local thugs and neighborhood hoodlums alike.

Rage is manifested in the notion of rapper as warrior, belonging to a clan or squad, unifying with others for protection against violence and the caprices of the government. Using the terminology of organized violence, (*croisade, révolution*), rappers proscribe the unification of all “bad boys” of the neighborhood against the greedy French state, corrupt politicians, and the excessively wealthy. This unification is given a name,

<sup>16</sup> *Le Troisième Œil*, “Hymne à la racaille de France,” *Hier, aujourd’hui, et demain*

<sup>17</sup> See book by Christian Jelen for a portrait of cites.

<sup>18</sup> Fonky Family, “Sans Rémission,” *Si Dieu veut*

as in Fonky Family's "Operation Coup de Poing," likening it to a military campaign. Listen to the idea of clan in this citation from Fonky Family's "Sans rémission":

Toujours le même béton pour horizon/ Baisons ce système qui nous  
mène la vie dure/ Fureur de vaincre au fond du Coeur/ Convaincre et  
lutter sans peurs/ (*Si Dieu veut*).

This notion of unification against state injustice echoes the idea of a common, nationalized experience with which the youth of Marseille can identify. As Béatrice Sberna has said, these ideas open up a dialogue with the youth, who not only share the same musical tastes but life conditions and world vision (60).

Rage against the economic injustices promoted by the state incites the rappers to reconsider their position in French society, and one begins to see the hybridity within which they see themselves. For they are at once inside and outside the French system. They participate in the system by taking up subject positions as sons of poor families who depend on state assistance: living in HLM, to name one. However, because of the feeling of being abandoned by an indifferent, sometimes hostile government, some artists recommend a rejection of the state and display an attitude of independence. One text asks: is it possible to be represented by a local government? In "*Cherche pas à Comprendre*" Fonky Family's tone is aggressive and resolved. Again, one finds the idea that one can only count on oneself. The refrain addresses the state directly :

Fuck la misère, le maire, le préfet de police et le commissaire/  
Ils disent nous représenter, mais connaissent quoi de nos existences ?/  
Sont-ils déjà venus dans nos rues, histoire de voir ce qui se passe ?/...  
C'est sinistre on ne demande pas la lune mais des logis décents l'état nous  
répond par quoi ?/... On demande pas grande chose des emplois l'état nous  
répond avec quoi ?

The text concludes with a challenge to listeners to come to Belsunce themselves to see the poverty that exists; at the same time, for the rappers, they should not vote or participate in the system.

« *Rapper, c'est le seul don que Dieu m'ait donné, /*

*C'est pour cela que je m'accroche et fonce comme un acharné »<sup>19</sup>*

In taking up the microphone, the rappers emphasize taking up the pen, for prominent in their songs are descriptions of writing and reflection, which suggests the process of self-creation. For example, rap songs written in the milieu of Marseille's *cités* offer a regard on the neighborhoods that is subjective, but this regard is rendered legitimate because of the rapper's authenticity. Himself a *métèque* youth from a *zone défavorisée*, the Marseille rapper critiques society and his marginal situation hoping to help other people "below."<sup>20</sup> Writing is a means to make public the trials of street life. Psy 4 de la Rime, for instance, interpolates listeners to find themselves in their texts: they represent the life that their fans lead. For example, in the song, "Voici," they make the following dedication, "L'album Psy4 vient faire écran/ Dédié aux blacks, rouges, jaunes, white, déjà sous écrou/ Voyou tu te reconnaîtras dans nos écrits, / L'album est un mélange d'intellect et de voyou (*Block Party*). » They call attention to the subversiveness of their writings, as if already on trial (mise sous écrou), and this mix of thug and thoughtful writing gives an authenticity to their lyrics. Often, the Marseillais insist upon the scandal that their works create in "mainstream" society. In "La Boomba," le Troisième Oeil swears never to forget that they come from the streets, and that their texts, criticized for being too radical, break the wall of silence on taboo subjects: "Sortis des taudis des coins populaires cachés de Mars/...Aujourd'hui je brandis le mic pour mes frères." These districts are "hidden" so that one cannot see their poverty; yet the rappers consider it their duty to expose it.

As a subject leading a difficult life, the act of writing becomes not only a means of personal expression but an alternative to social and psychological failure. Ink is a metaphor for the blood of a rapper-poet, and when he writes, it flows. In a rap song, blood is a synecdoche for the entire life of the rapper. Their poetry is pregnant with images of blood, flowing ink, tears, and the soul; all elements which emphasize the self-creation of a *métèque* identity. For the Fonky Family, their writings, their flesh, and their identity are all one and the same: "Des lyrics d'or/ Peau de

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<sup>19</sup> Le Troisième Œil, "Au passé," Avec le cœur ou rien

<sup>20</sup> Jean Calio, p. 53.



couleur d'or bronzé" (*Maintenant ou jamais*). For the Chiens de Paille, ink and blood meet and mix in the song "L'encre de ma plume." They say :

C'est comme combattre pour sa liberté. / Un contrat de mon sang libellé. /  
Quand j'écris mes tripes se vident d'autant de lignes de rimes, /  
Je sens l'abîme se creuser.

The narrator's blood is libeled, because it is formulated and exposed by writing. Further along in this song, to solidify the image of blood, the Chiens "signent" this contract with their "lyrics strychnine." Strychnine of course is so potent that it kills at a weak dose; the Chiens de Paille consider their verses as powerful.

Another way rappers insist on the legitimacy of their art is by denouncing the temptation of other artists to write weak lyrics. Instead, they call for a return to texts and rhymes, and call to inject meaning into their songs. To begin, in IAM's "Contrat de conscience," the group distinguishes itself from rappers whose lyrics are meaningless, "Voilà, prendre quelque fois position évite une lutte/ Différencie tout mon art des musiques de putes." The designation, "musique de putes" is not only an insult but also a reference to the fact that those who write weak rhymes prostitute themselves for money. Secondly, the dreams and reflections described in these songs show this distinction between rappers who wish a return to texts. The Chiens de Paille imagine themselves in the future as above commercial rap. The song, "Ma part des songs" is a lyrical ballad, the fruit of their thoughts and reflections. "Je rêvais que les petits comprennent/ Que mes lyrics opèrent de suites concrètes de la vie/Je rêvais d'esprits ouverts aux rites de nos vers/...Qu'on vive de nos textes loin de ces biz modestes et petits commerces." This citation shows a desire for a concrete, immediate impact on the public, and that the effect be visible and lasting. Lastly, reflection is as important in dreams, especially for one of the oldest Marseille rap groups, IAM. Looking back on their 10-year plus career, they posit the soul and heart as the source for their writings, not words and images that seize the eye. The refrain from "Stratégie d'un pion" uses the past conditional tense to express this:

J'aurais pu mettre plus de string que de sens dans mes écrits/  
Mais le cœur commande à la main, à chaque heure mon âme écrit/  
Loin d'ce brouillard, mon regard s'étend jusqu'à l'infini/  
Scrutant le quotidien je vis donc je vois donc je dis.

The “string” evoked in the first verse represents sexual images, or any provocative image that has little value or meaning. Evoking Descartes, “je vis donc je vois donc je dis,” the rapper elevates his position from entertainer to truth-teller. These rappers thereby defend the ideas in their songs by inciting a return to texts and meaningful rhymes.

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« *Marseille compte sur nous pour l'avenir.* »<sup>21</sup>

The texts presented here give an idea of the problems that youth of immigrant origin face in the Marseille region of France. Tensions manifest themselves in several contradictions, some of which deal directly with the question of identity, as between the lines, rappers seem to struggle with their positions in society. On one hand, the texts proclaim a rejection of the French state (as form of local government of Marseille) because of the widespread poverty and violence in the *cités*; however, this position stands in some opposition to the rapper who is self-created and self-contextualized by the very life conditions he condemns. On the other hand, these rappers attack the state when it is because of the economic system that they have had success (by millions of album and concert ticket sales). Their success extends well beyond the PACA region, and some, particularly IAM, have enjoyed worldwide fame. Can they represent a marginalized group—young poor children of immigrants—without belonging to it any longer? Moreover, in view of *banlieue* culture in general, which has extended itself not only in music but in films and clothing lines,<sup>22</sup> how much of the rappers' material is meant for consumption by outsiders?

In conclusion, after having studied these texts it is clear that these youth consider themselves *métèque*. Their identification is not of binary composition: French/foreigner, *Français/Arabe*. In contrast, they identify with Marseille hip-hop culture which itself is a hybrid of American, French and Arab hip-hop; however, this is not without tensions. Once one takes up the microphone in front of an audience of consumers, one no longer belongs to the group of impoverished, marginalized youth. The rappers critique France but love Marseille. Thus the *métèque* identity is a

<sup>21</sup> Le Troisième Œil, “La Boomba,” *Avec le cœur ou rien*

<sup>22</sup> See the article, “Ces marques ‘made in’ banlieue,” p. 134

cultural production as opposed to an ethnic production. Young Marseillais are made; the identity manifests itself, as IAM has said, "méditerranéen de souche."

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