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Anthony Pecqueux

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DURAND

RAP MUSIC AND HIP-HOP CULTURE IN THE FRANCOPHONE WORLD

World Music • Popular Culture

Black, Blanc, Beur: Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture in the Francophone World addresses the emergence and growing notoriety of rap music and hip-hop culture in France, Quebec, and Western Africa. It contains a foreword by the noted rap authority Adam Krims and articles by renowned hip-hop scholars on both sides of the Atlantic, and addresses hip-hop from the perspective of various disciplines: African studies, anthropology, cultural studies, ethnology, French and Francophone studies, history, linguistics, musicology, psychology, and sociology. Contributors discuss the history of French rap music from its origin to the present, the various artists and their groups, stage performances of rap groups in Paris and Marseilles, the art of graffiti, and the French public's perceptions of rap music. This is the first book in English on the subject of French music and hip-hop culture and will be a wonderful resource for scholars and students of African, French, and pop culture as well as ethnomusicology, and for the general public interested in rap music and hip-hop culture.

Alain-Philippe Durand is assistant professor of French and film studies at the University of Rhode Island in Kingston, as well as visiting professor of cultural studies at the International Business Program of the Graduate School of Business, Marseilles-Provence in Marseilles, France.

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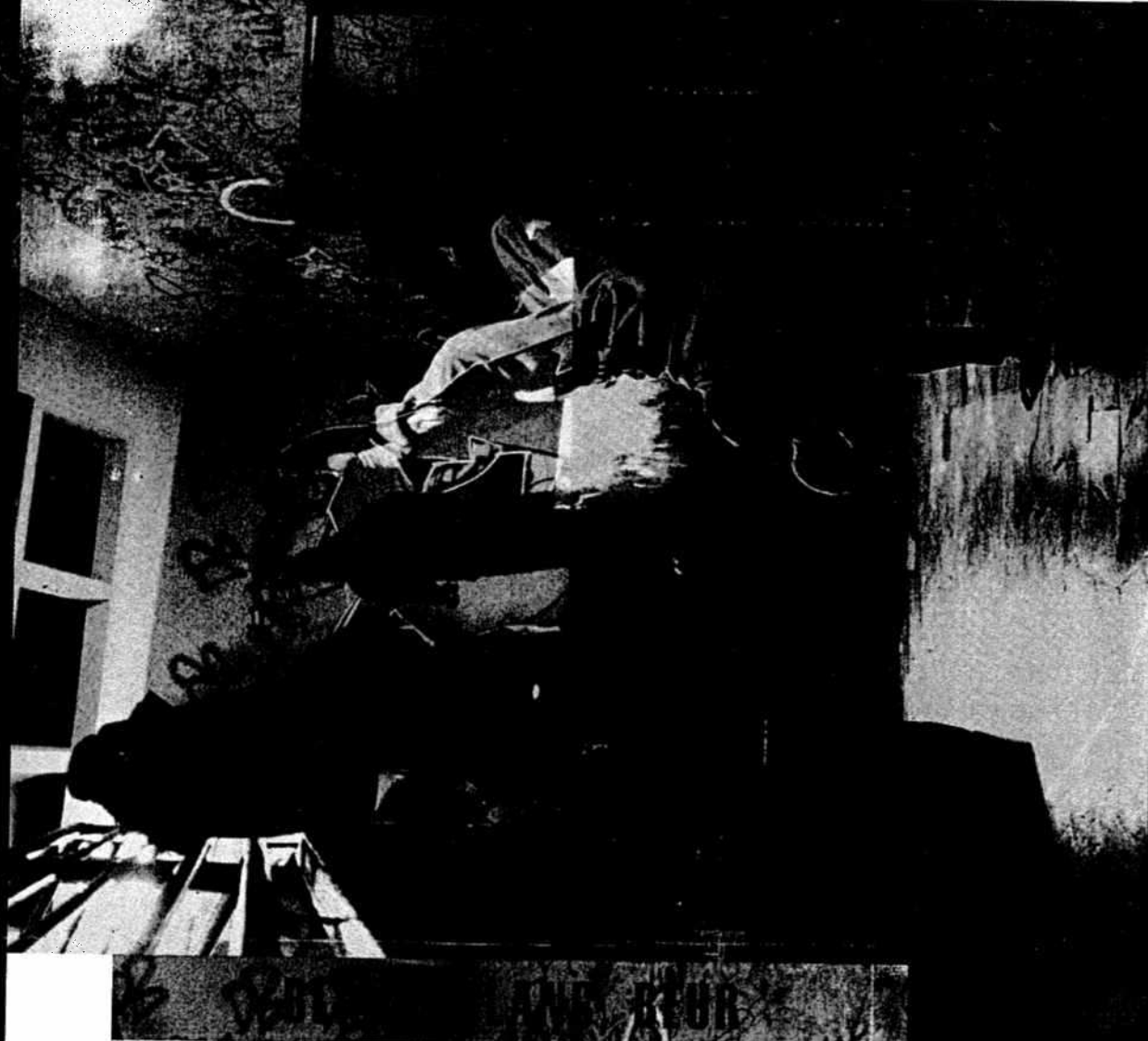
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Black, Blanc, Beur

Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture in the Francophone World

Edited by Alain-Philippe Durand



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(1948–2002)

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Common Partitions: Musical Commonplaces¹

Anthony Pecqueur
Translated from the French by Yannick Nassoy
and Seth Whidden

Both on records and on stage, there are commonplaces about rap, especially about its various practices; these commonplaces will be called "common partitions," in the sense of separate plans of action. They serve to express first a particular knowledge of the art world of rap (of the history of its practices, actors, and constituent rules and a partisan position on the latter), and then the existence of a social, emotive, or cognitive relationship between artists and audiences. It is from this angle, and in a perspective borrowed from pragmatics from a sociological anthropological point of view, that I will examine some expressions of that relationship, which underlies the skills required to practice and appreciate this music. To do so, it must be posited that musical activity contains its very introduction onto the public scene: it takes on the procedural form of the test.² The latter represents the fundamental process by which an artist, in support of the previous tests, ventures to confront his own ideal of rap—actualized by his practice—with that of listeners.³

MUSICAL NONCHALANCE

As a general rule, rappers⁴ establish and put to the test a relationship with audiences. In order to characterize them more precisely, let us consider the distinction the actors agree to make between "the underground" and "the general public," the former referring to "our audience, that is those who listen to hip-hop" and the latter to "everyman." The aim between those two groups is quite plain: "When I speak of people,

obviously I mean the general public" (*Groove*). It amounts to distinguishing "amateurs"⁵ from "the-greatest-possible-number-of-people." The *amateurs* are those who enjoy rap productions and let it be known by buying them, and those who like rap and let it be known by always being potential *amateur-practitioners*—and not necessarily "bands," the necessary condition consisting of uttering words to a preexistent tune.

As for the-greatest-possible-number-of-people, it consists of those who are also likely to buy these productions for it is "a type of music that is not intended for a hundred people but for millions of them."⁶ If the-greatest-possible-number-of-people must be aimed at, it remains to be determined what the rappers' target is; that is, which of the two groups are concerned. Here I am taking up the distinction made by Jacques Cheyronnaud between "two different operations: taking something or something as one's target (this will be called targeting), and using this designation of a target to some purpose (this will be called aiming)" ("La railerie," 78). Yet, on the one hand, *amateurs* are never won beforehand and by definition the-greatest-possible-number-of-people always remains to be won; on the other hand, it is impossible to address (segments of) songs to each of these two groups separately. As a result, rappers always target them both at the same time; the distinction between these two categories does not hold as far as the singing activity is concerned. I may now define the fact of addressing them both at the same time as targeting those concerned, that is, through a single musical act addressing the *amateurs* and treating the-greatest-possible-number-of-people as concerned ones. These being "individuals who minimally converge on expectations regarding the practices of rap" (Cheyronnaud, "La grand-messe," 32) and who feel neither forgotten nor betrayed by the fact that priority is given to sales.

Any distinction must thus be abandoned and only one category is worth retaining: namely, those concerned. And among them no one is unaware that they contribute to this procedural form: being concerned means accepting to contribute to it and ratifying it, and vice versa. Nor is anyone unaware of the fact that a form of nonchalance gradually comes to prevail among them all—some targeting concerned ones, others being put on an equal footing with a priori nonconcerned ones, others knowing that their status has been raised. This nonchalance stems from a general attitude of rappers that they have to communicate with ostentation; this attitude will be referred to as "self-irony." I will not take up the classic analyses regarding this is-

sue because I do not view this attitude as the fact of uttering P in order to communicate non-P, even though this also exists. Self-irony can be found in the communication of a relationship with concerned ones and consists of a critical distance from oneself and what one does, and accordingly from the listeners who appreciate these practices. This self-ironic nonchalance does not denote a lack of seriousness in one's work, but on the contrary a concentration on the lack of seriousness required in targeting concerned ones.

Neither does it correspond to a lack of respect for listeners since it results in strategically making use of their perspicacity; they become concerned only when they understand this nonchalance. The use that comes from them extends to all kinds of inferences, interpretations, and conclusions on the basis of the hypothesis contained in this target: "If you really are hip-hop, you know quite well what we're talking about; you're therefore in a position to fill in the blanks, to understand by yourself." While it is rarely formulated in this way,⁷ it nonetheless remains implied all the time. For instance, when the Fonky Family say "No model, we all try to find ourselves a place / If God wants one day we too will hold . . ." ("La vie de rêve" [The Dream Life]), it is the listener who completes the sentence with "a place," which is not mentioned in the song, especially as s/he is supposed to know that the group's first album, entitled *si Dieu Vient* [If God Wants], enabled them to somehow hold "a place."

DISCOGRAPHIC PARTITIONS

A record may be considered an anamorphosis of a musical action: a reduction of a life-size practice to the size of this material medium, which is also a necessary stage in the relationship with a public since ours is a culture of sound antecedence. I will now try to find a few instances of this musical nonchalance from the angle of common partitions, which are as many creative repetitions (that is, keyings of original schemas). The act of "referring to something" is an interesting starting point, since reference is all about how to make it clear that utterances concern a particular field of reality: how to render the words-world direction of fit, as John Robert Searle puts it (3). This relationship between words and the world fits into the meta-relationship between the co-communicators; therefore noticing the references in a

speech allows one to grasp some elements of this self-irony. For reference implies a global process of selecting from among the objects in the world, of taking a stand on them, of addressing the co-communicator, and of qualifying all these operations. These all make it necessary to let some intention show; one does not refer to anything in just any old way, especially since self-irony as a way of putting the perspicacity of the co-communicator to the test often contains a clause of referential vagueness. Therefore, it is up to the latter to decide on an interpretation. These references may concern the geographical environment, wanderings that are common practices in cities (or in a city); the social and political, or cultural environment; leisure activities—commonplaces about celebration or boredom are then involved; etc. The most striking references are those that allude to common partitions of the practice of rap, and that can be either universal or local.

Local and Supposedly Common to Some of Those Concerned by French Rap

Bringing controlled derision to its height, Stomy Bugsy turned a hit entitled "Bad boys de Marseille" into "Le playboy de Sarcelles."⁸ In addition to the pun in the title and the thematic changes he made, he chose two M.C.s from the original version for the choirs. And above all, he chose as a musical basis the tune that Ennio Morricone composed for the film *Le Professionnel* (The Professional). In France, this tune is less associated with the motion picture than with a television commercial for Royal Canin dog food, in which a dog, radiant with health, runs in the mountains. By slowing the tune, he conjures up this dog in the act of running and cannot fail to suggest a sort of identification with him; this is a very curious playboy indeed.

References may be limited within a school, such as that of the "sil-ver microphone" brought to life by IAM in Marseilles (IAM). One of its watchwords is the phrase "a type of music that is not intended for a hundred people but for millions of them," which according to the same M.C. becomes: "a joint not that is not intended for a hundred people but for my lungs / Precisely for my lungs!" (Akhenaton, Freeman, et al.). These local references may ultimately become a self-referential and especially self-ironic play of mirrors. Such is the case with Faf Larage, who imagined an interview of a do-nothing who lives off of his girlfriend's salary; the problem is that "there was this

rapper on TV one night; the guy is not bad, actually. His name is Faf Larage. He's my spitting image, my girlfriend thought it was I (. . .). She bought the album of Kheops [on which this very song plays], on which I'm supposed to rap. That guy's got some nerve! (. . .) He wrote a text and it sounds like a more vulgar version of myself" (Faf Larage).

Universal and Synecdoches of the Act of Rapping

Let us take the famous example "Yes yes yo / On the beat yo." Repeating it is not enough; it has to be skillfully modeled above all. According to Faf Larage, the do-nothing who wants to tell his life story through rap goes: "Wech wech yo / On my bed yo." One of the historic origins of rap, the ego-trip, becomes the "megotrip" (Akhenaton, Freeman, et al.)⁹ in a hymn to marijuana.

Universal and Situated in a Particular Context

This is a fundamental type of reference which makes it possible to complete the process of targeting concerned ones, with the system of judgement in the context of a concert—a specificity of rap: "Raise your hand, your fist and your joint if you recognize yourself," "Raise your fist, raise your joint, raise your head my friend," and "Raise your hand if you're hip-hop / And say la la la."¹⁰ These injunctions in the form of guides for action indeed make it possible to complete the action that started by targeting concerned ones; people who had never been to a rap concert before would then become competent, as they would find out that they cover the reality of the system of judgement applied here.

Stage Partitions

This last reference leads me to move on to concerts and to the common partitions put into play there. A concert will again be defined as the procedural form of the test, which seems fairly archetypal at first sight but certainly deserves further discussion. As a process that contains the clause of its judgement—a process that includes this judgement's expression—it represents the place par excellence where a taste can be

expressed. Hannah Arendt, in a commentary of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, defined this act in this way:

Judgement, to be valid, depends on the presence of others. (...) That the capacity to judge is a specifically political ability in exactly the sense denoted by Kant, namely, the ability to see things not only from one's own point of view but in the perspective of all those who happen to be present; (...) Judging is one, if not the most, important activity in which this sharing-the-world-with-others comes to pass. (221)

This taste is expressed through judgement but, as the author shows, the latter does not consist in approval or rejection but in co-approval or co-rejection, which is collectively made. A concert entails specific procedures of action that result from the commitment to something and with someone; in other words, it is an eminently political activity. That explains the particular institutional attention devoted to concerts; the assembly as such does not constitute a threat, for the threat stems from the procedures involved. For instance, when a civil servant in the City Hall of Marseilles read the relatively neutral review of a hip-hop festival in Marseilles in the daily newspaper *Libération*,¹¹ he concluded: "Organizers simply have to choose local groups because there is some pressure; otherwise these concerts would end badly (...). At the Marsatac festival, there were more than two thousand of them; there would have been big problems otherwise (...)'s specific to rap" (Mérit).

Besides, as I pointed out previously, ours is a culture of sound antecedence of a discographic nature, one of the implementations of which is to target concerned ones. Since in addition, its upshot is the reference to the system of judgement during concerts, I will posit that a concert gathers concerned ones; it configures and sustains a culture of concerned ones. On this basis, I will now describe a few of the partitions proposed by artists with a view of the felicity of the plan of action during my two series of ethnographical observations. The first one came within the context of a line-up of leading groups in French rap, centered on the concert given by Das EFX in a small music hall in the city center;¹² the second one was a hip-hop festival gathering the different modes of expression of hip-hop in several halls of a complex in an outlying area.¹³ These partitions constitute acts of reference that touch on what follows.

The Social and Political Context, and at the Same Time They Refer to Prior Practices, in a Critical Schema of Institutional Denunciation

While the National Front (an extreme right-wing political party) remains one of the first targets of stigmatization, it is now stigmatized only according to particular circumstances generally speaking, its systematic denunciation being now too easy. On the other hand, the police keep this systematic character, which is often very effective to win the audience's support.

Abuse is not enough; groups still have to give an inventive show in which the audience can take part. For instance, the group IV My People first invited the audience at the Marsatac festival to raise their forefingers in the air and to sing the slogan "fuck the police"; those concerned ones, knowing the device all too well, did not react and some even snickered. One of the M.C.s had to arouse them by saying that wherever they had played, even in small towns, "when we say 'fuck the police,' the audience makes a hell of noise"; the audience complied on this second incitement. At the same festival, the D.J. of the group Prodigé Namor started playing a piece that went "Houhou, houhou"; the concerned ones continued right away and spontaneously instead of KRS One: "That's the sound of da police!" This is indeed an instance of reference, of strategic use of the perspicacity of the concerned ones; this use makes the latter thoughtful again of collective political commitment against the institution of the police. My last example is also a referential one: in the line-up Das EFX, the group Puissance Nord played their song "Assassinat du poulet" (Murder of the Chicken)¹⁴ only after asking if there were any police officers in the hall. This was a sort of judicial precaution with a testimonial effect; the group NTM had been sentenced in 1997 for insulting police officers who were present during a concert.

The Cultural and Emotional Contexts

A few partitions turn out to be quite useful for winning the support of an audience without lapsing into gratuitous flattery, which would be disapproved of by those concerned ones who "won't be taken in." For example, the M.C.'s Arabica at the Dream Team Gathering¹⁵ played their first song amidst the total indifference of their audience; one of the

M.C.s even got angry with them. The second M.C. took the floor to introduce the second song, saying he was very glad that they were quiet since it was necessary to listen carefully to their lyrics, which were about the wasteland of North Africa. Moreover, he said that he dedicated the song to his mother, who had come to see him in concert for the first time then and who had known the wasteland before the Algerian civil war. Applause broke out, all the more so because the first M.C. had gotten hold of an Algerian flag and because the song was built on a sample of traditional Algerian music. They eventually received a standing ovation; it had taken these two essential emotional aspects represented by the figures of identity that are the mother and the wasteland to reverse a situation that had promised to be very delicate at first. There is another emotional aspect that is effective when adequately introduced: namely, letting a teenager or a child up on the stage. The Mafia Trece gladly did it at the Marsatac festival, causing dynamic surprise. The M.C.'s Arabica did not meet with as much success when they did it just after, for the element of surprise was over.

Commonplaces about Concerts, Which May Also Become Mistakes in the Adaptation to the Situation

These mistakes stem from an error in judgement either of the audience or of the frame of the performance and can even lead bands to give up playing live. Among the cases of the audience's errors, Cheb Aïssa tried to have the audience join in the chorus at the Marsatac festival; they were supposed to go "Ohohohoh." This unsuccessful attempt was prolonged during three choruses without having the slightest effect. As for cases of misjudgment of the frame of the situation, I will take the example of the group KDD who, at the same festival, after having left the stage, came back a few minutes later and expressed their disappointment at the fact that the audience had not demanded an encore. But these concerned ones were fully aware of the format of the festival, where there is never any encore since a previously set program has to be followed; here it is the group who does not respect the format. And those mistakes are likely to lead groups to give up playing live, which above all means giving in to the audience's ultimate power of decision, as was the case with rapper Daddy Lord C. at the Marsatac festival. Indeed five minutes after the beginning of his performance, the hall had almost emptied out, and after fifteen minutes' silence on the part of the

audience he asked if they wanted more of it: meeting with more silence he left the stage, though the average performance lasted for forty-five minutes.

These considerations suggest a few interesting leads for further analysis of the practices of rap and their cultural reception. On the one hand, they bring to light a few skills required to practice this music, through the mastery of the relevant uses of language. It is necessary to target concerned ones and to let self-irony plainly show, to proceed by more or less strong implications, especially by means of references containing a clause of interpretative ambiguity. But that is not the only means; nonchalance comes within the larger score of all the speeches that may be labeled as skillful and which, to reach pertinence, oscillate between literality and metaphorality in the context of a general stylistic line that rappers set for themselves and that remains inseparable from the idea of a continuum between literality and metaphorality (Pecqueur, 59–77).

On the other hand, it is necessary to make use of the listeners' perceptivity; in order to be able to appreciate this music (that is, its metaphors, literality, self-irony, references: in a word, to be concerned by it), one has to go through many interpretative procedures: inferences, hypotheses, etc. These are both necessary and sufficient, just as it is necessary and sufficient for rappers to make use of them. This means that these different skills are interdependent: they are co-required by those who practice this music and by those who listen to it, and continue to be collectively and gradually defined, relative to the minimal constituent rules of this art world.

That explains why this music contains so many common partitions and why they are so present in its studio-recorded as well as live performances; and above all it explains why rappers often stand on the narrow thread of those partitions, modulating them with many puns and much stage business. On the one hand those not concerned, who do not know about these constituent rules that are "played" with, cannot understand where the creative character lies and only notice repetitions: hence the impression of conformity and lack of originality often criticized (Pecqueur, 16–19). On the other hand, those concerned know about these partitions and consequently look for original musical actions, on the stage as well as on records. And that is where a great part of the interest of ethnographical observations of concerts lies; rappers certainly dare to establish a culture of concerned ones, but then they

have to assume its practical consequences. For if the audience consists of concerned ones, it will also be the most difficult type of audience, one who "won't be taken in" and who will require the greatest effort so as to prevent plain disappointment.

NOTES

1. Support for the writing of this essay came from a grant awarded by the Provence Region (PACA) and the '02 Q.P. de Mars Association. This work is entirely aimed at proposing and putting to the test a few exploratory tools for an analysis of the practices of rap. It is the fruit of work supervised by Jean-Louis Fabiani and Jacques Cheyronnaud (Ph.D. at the E.H.E.S.S. in progress).
2. I use the term in its dynamic sense pointed out by Boltanski and Thévenot: the confrontation of an ideal or a theory with a public situation.
3. My discographical references come from an ordinary corpus for a listener of French rap; as for the references to concerts, they result from ethnographical observations carried out mainly at two series of concerts in Marseilles.
4. I will concentrate on M.C.s and on their performative evocations of what they do but I will bear in mind that the word "rappers" refers to them as well as to their musical counterparts, D.J.s. On the one hand, a song results from a certain relation between a tune and its lyrics. On the other hand, musical creation in rap consists of recycling a preexistent musical or cultural heritage in an original way; therefore D.J.s also put a relationship to the test of their listeners: namely, the relationship between this heritage and the resulting innovation.
5. The French word "amateur" means both "those who like something," or "fans" and "those who practice a music, or a sport, as an amateur" (as opposed to professionally). To preserve this double meaning (which is absent from its English counterpart), we have chosen to keep the original French word (translator's note).
6. Akhenaton (with La Fonky Family), "Bad boys de Marseille — version sauvage."
7. When it actually is, it is usually a pedagogical warning as in the case with Mos Def: "We are hip-hop, you, me, everybody, we are hip-hop so hip-hop is goin' where we're goin'."
8. Akhenaton (with La Fonky Family), "Bad boys de Marseille" and Stomy Bugsy, respectively.
9. Pun formed with the words "mégot" and "trip." "Mégot" is a colloquial word for "cigarette end" (translator's note).
10. La Fonky Family, "Sans titre"; Busta Flex, "Black" and "Hip-hop forever," respectively.

11. "A young and urban crowd invaded the Docks des Suds on Friday night, around seven p.m. (...) each night, more than two thousand people turned up (...) some members of the audience had gotten in despite a quite burdensome team of bouncers (...). Rap has achieved parity with reggae as the emblematic music of the popular districts of Marseille, so much so that the organizers say it is impossible not to make way for local formations." The journalist simply wanted to point out that it is difficult to overlook the vitality of local practices; the audience has nothing to do with it, those concerts being organized and their programs being set well in advance.

12. May 19, 2000, at the Espace Julien in Marseilles.

13. Marsatac Connexion Festival Hip-hop, June 2-3, 2000, at the Docks des Suds in Marseilles.

14. "Poulet" (Chicken) is a pejorative word for "cop" (translator's note).

15. A kind of family gathering of Marseilles's rap scene: about twenty groups followed one another (some very popular, others just starting out) before an audience of nearly ten thousand people (February 14, 2000, at the Dome in Marseilles).

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"Why Are We Waiting to Start the Fire?": French Gangsta Rap and the Critique of State Capitalism

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July 14th, Bastille Day, a day annually reserved for celebrations of France's liberal rationalist doctrine of liberty, equality, and fraternity, took on a new, ironic meaning when a 1995 *Concert des Libertés* (Freedom Concert) in the southern town of La Seyne-sur-Mer became the centerpiece of a set of legal and political controversies known as *L'affaire NTM* (The NTM Affair). Organized to protest the recent mayoral victory of the ultra-nationalist political party, the Front National (FN), in the neighboring Provençal cities of Toulon and Orange, the concert has become a symbol not of free speech and equality of political participation, as it had been intended, but rather of the inherent inequality within the French economic, political, and judicial system. A year after the concert, two rappers, Kool Shen and Joey Starr, from the suburban Paris-based rap group, Suprême NTM, were found guilty of "orally abusing" the security forces present while introducing their song "Police" during their performance.

At the time of the trial, the prosecution entered the song's lyrics as evidence against the group. "Police," from the 1993 album *J'appuie sur la gâchette* (I Pull the Trigger),¹ involves a virulent critique of police brutality against *banlieusard* (suburban) and immigrant youth, deriding the police as a "veritable gang" composed of "often mentally retarded," "brainless ones," and containing a fantasy sequence in which a character, "Joey Joe"—possibly Joey Starr's alter ego?—tracks down cops in the subway.² In presenting the song, they encouraged the crowd to