

Mariam Kanakomo
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French 229

Video Essay: The Transformative Power of Francophone Rap Music

<https://youtu.be/JZagMLh99TQ>

I was interested in exploring the place the Francophone rap music holds most specifically in France and other European countries. It is a peculiar artistic space since it is dominated by Black and Arab people; I was interested in the French created and used by these artists as it impacted “mainstream” French in return. I also wanted to explore the ways in which rap music was used to externalize Black and Arab people’s feelings about specific events such as police brutality. Through rap, race and identity are pronounced and articulated in a way that modern French society does not allow for. I chose this particular medium because the imagery a lot of Francophone rappers used were very striking and tied with their musical art; it showed the perspectives they hold over their own societies. Rap and its primary performers also shaped public debates over identity and race in ways that are unseen in other arenas (political, literary, TV, movies, ect).

The subject of Rap Music in the Francophone World is one that is deeply interesting due to the incredible popularity it holds all around the world but also for its language production. The French created in these spaces comes from certain segments of French society; it usually comes from cités (lower-class housing projects) and is influenced by languages from former French colonies (Arabic, Lingala, Bambara, etc). It’s also an artistic sphere that is in contact with politics quite often and as a result, also shapes certain public discourses notably on race, identity, class, and police brutality. I decided to focus on cases of police brutality because the usual response coming from politicians being in favor of the police and also because of the numerous mentions of it by rappers. Since the early 1990’s, with Suprême NTM’s song about the police (which got them in trouble with the law) or current rappers like Damso, Alpha Wann and others who have rapped about Adama Traoré, it has forced society to look more closely at how the victims of police brutality are and the role of “racisme d’état” in this sort of incidents.

Most importantly, I also wanted to explore the connections today’s Francophone rap music has other art forms. I found that particular writers were named but Aimé Césaire came up quite frequently. As a Negritude movement writer, he has been incredibly influential over many artists and in a way, rap music continues a lot of what was started by him and other Black Francophone writers. The idea of “continued remembrance”, as articulated by Aimé Césaire, is in fact a pillar of Francophone rap music as controversial topics in mainstream French society (colonialism, slavery, etc) are regularly rapped about even today.

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